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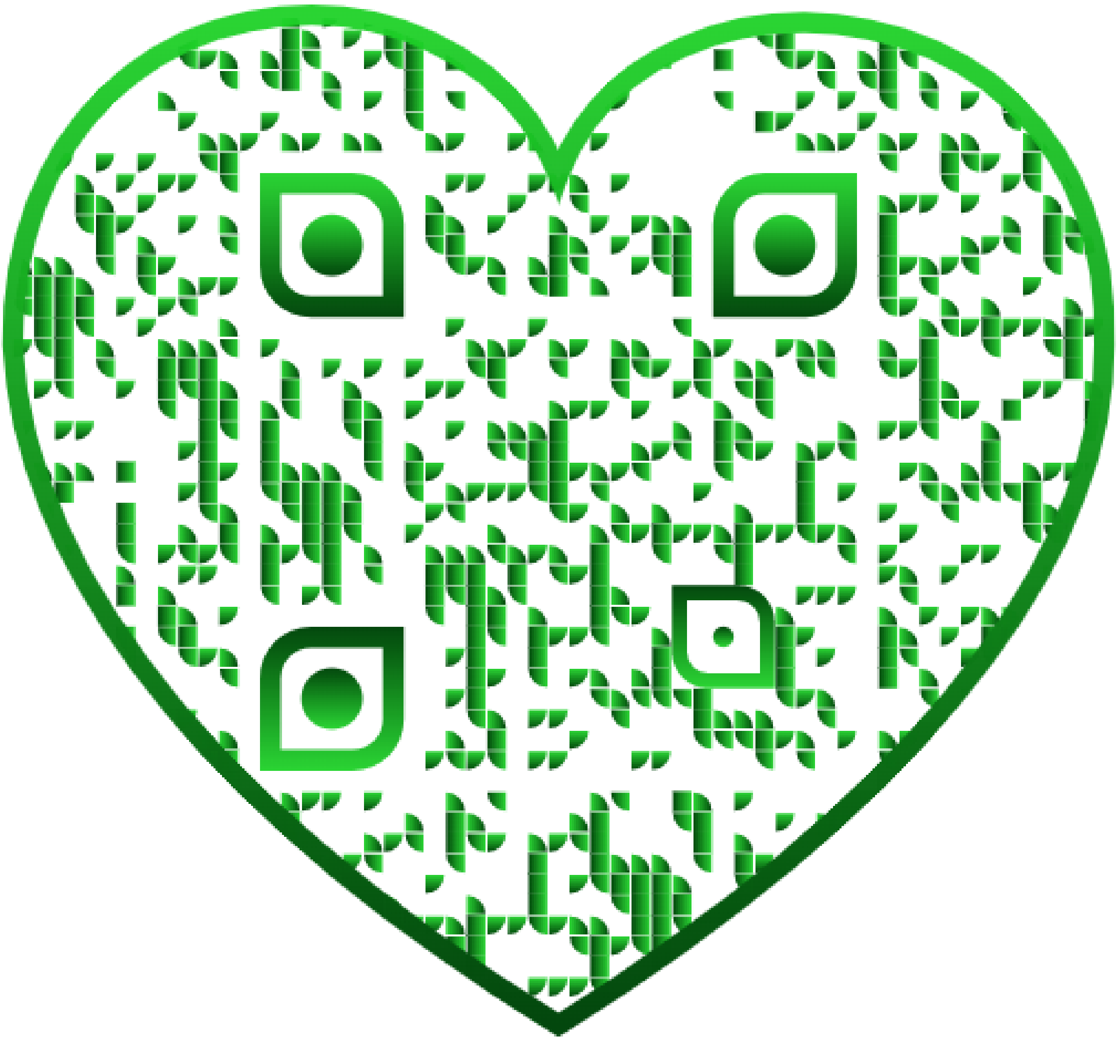

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The Maltings, West Street, Bourne,
Lincolnshire PE10 9PH
Tel: 01778 391000
Email: editorial@birdwatch.co.uk
Web: www.birdguides.com

Editor: Josh Jones
Deputy Editor: Ed Stubbs
Content Editor: Simon Papps
Designer: Dan Jarman
Optics Editor: Mike Alibone
Photo Consultant: Kit Day

Publisher: Rob McDonnell
Head of Commercial: Ian Lycett
(ian.lycett@birdwatch.co.uk)
Marketing Manager: Katherine Brown
(katherineb@warnersgroup.co.uk)
Digital Marketing Executive:
Tom Sharman
(tom.sharman@warnersgroup.co.uk)

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ADVISORY PANEL

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COVER PHOTOS: ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK BY NICK SAUNDERS (BIRDIMAGENCY.COM); WHITE-THROATED NEEDLETAIL BY SAM VILES; ELEGANT PITTA BY JAMES EATON

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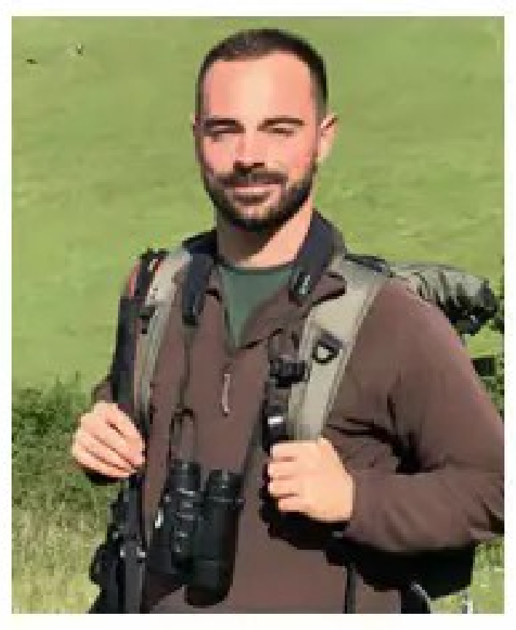
BONAPARTE'S GULL BY KIT DAY



THERE are so many fascinating puzzles to solve in birding, which is part of what makes this hobby evergreen. Identification conundrums and migration mysteries are two that repeatedly come to the forefront, especially in Britain where rare and unusual birds form such a big part of our birding years.

In this issue, we explore two contemporary issues that birders are grappling with. The first of these is the recent uptick in Bonaparte's Gull records in Europe. This elegant North American larid is turning up on this side of the Atlantic with increasing frequency. While this trend may be a positive for the would-be rarity finder, is it necessarily a good thing for the bird itself? Does the rise reflect a population boom or something altogether more sinister, such as a climate-related range shift? These are questions that I explore on pages 28-31.

On the other hand, Rough-legged Buzzard sightings have become increasingly scarce in Britain over the past decade. When I first started birding 25 years ago, this species felt like a guaranteed target on any winter trip to nearby North Norfolk, with multiple birds sometimes on offer. Yet the last few winters especially have produced precious few sightings.

The silver lining to this apparent decline in European birds reaching us is that it shines a spotlight on every 'Rough-legged Buzzard' that turns up. As Jack Ashton-Booth discusses on pages 32-37, we should bear in mind a Nearctic origin for these birds, especially the further west they appear. Ultimately, as Jack says, a surefire ID might not be possible in some cases, but good documentation of candidate birds may yet see the identity of this North American mega clinched on British shores.

Josh Jones

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EURASIAN WIGEON BY ED STUBBS

MAIN IMAGE: STEVE YOUNG; INSET: JOSH JONES

Arctic auk draws crowds to Dorset

On the morning of Boxing Day 2013, Dorset birder Debbie Saunders interrupted the festive celebrations of hundreds of birders when she discovered a Brünnich's Guillemot at her local Portland Harbour. This was big news – Brünnich's had always been a notoriously difficult species to catch up with on British shores, with birds usually either appearing in remote locations, staying for short durations, or being discovered dead or dying.

Indeed, there had been a couple of recent reminders of this hard-to-twitch status in the months leading up to the Portland bird's discovery, with a Brünnich's seen for 40 minutes on Iona, Argyll, in May and another off Filey Brigg, North Yorkshire, for all of five minutes in early December.

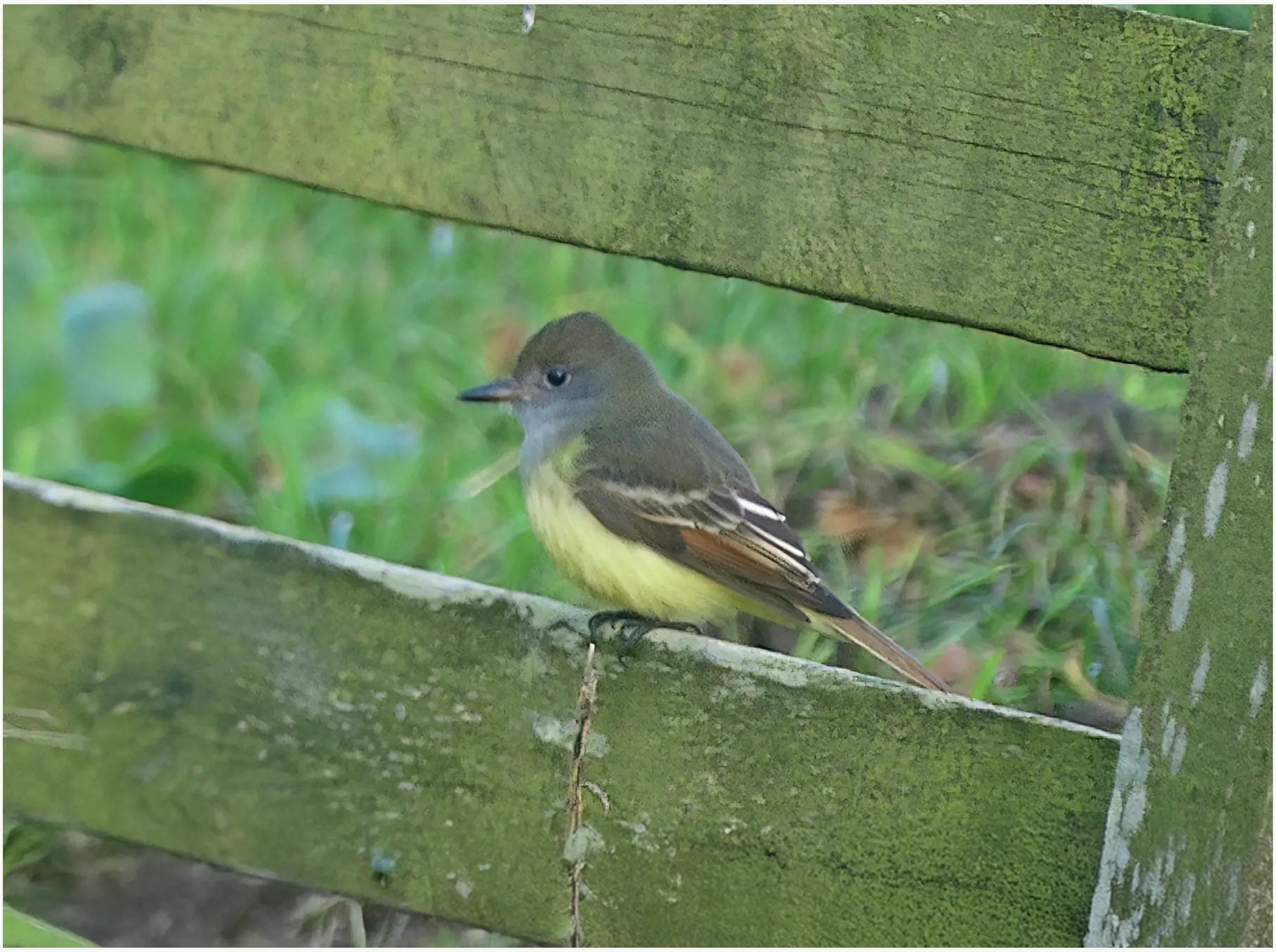
Most twitchers still needed the species for their British lists, with the only recent twitchable bird being at Lerwick, Shetland, in December 2005, which could be tricky to catch up with at times during the short midwinter days. As such, the next bird to linger was always going to draw a crowd, especially if not in the Northern Isles. And what better circumstances for a twitch than the English south coast over the Christmas break? The significance of this location cannot be underestimated, for there had never been an accepted record of Brünnich's Guillemot south of Lancashire previously.

In many respects, then, the opportunity to see an apparently healthy mainland English Brünnich's was almost unprecedented. If there was a measure of the guillemot's uniqueness and appeal, then it was the many hundreds of birders that swarmed around Portland over the following few days.

The twitch itself was entertaining, being of a similar ilk to that of the Devon Long-billed Murrelet seven years previously (see *Birdwatch* 401: 6-7). It was, for all intents and purposes, the ornithological equivalent of Whack-A-Mole – a mobile bird that could travel long distances under water at surprising speeds, which had a habit of popping up in unexpected places. Cue a panicked charge from hundreds of birders in the direction that the bird would appear, only for it to dive under again just as they arrived and pointed telescopes and cameras in its direction. Seconds later, it would reappear exactly where the crowd had just rushed over from! If someone had stuck the Benny Hill theme song on a loudspeaker at Portland Harbour that week, it would have felt apt.

The Brünnich's continued to delight visitors to the Dorset coast until 31 December, but pulled an overnight bunk to leave 2014 year-listers disappointed on New Year's Day. However, some consolation was provided by a continuing White-billed Diver along the coast at Brixham Harbour, Devon, which had played a fine second fiddle to the guillemot over the Christmas period and continued to give point-blank views well into January. ■

Brünnich's Guillemot
Portland, Dorset, December 2013



HAZEL ULSTAD

Shetland shocker!

Hazel Ulstad **tells the remarkable tale of the rarest British bird of the autumn, which was a Western Palearctic first to boot.**

Finder's Report

Great Crested Flycatcher, Tingwall, Shetland, 13-16 October 2025

I am lucky to live in beautiful Shetland, where there are often a lot of migratory birds to be seen – and of course others that get blown way off course, especially during autumn.

This story began when two friends who live very close to me saw a 'peerie bird' ('peerie' is small in Shetland speak) in their garden in the Tingwall Valley area of Mainland Shetland. They had never seen one like it before and wondered if it might be something a bit unusual, so they asked me if I wanted to come and see it in order to try and get a photo. This would allow us to figure out what it was, so of course I said yes.

I love feeding birds at this time of year and watching for unusual arrivals. Not having a clue what to expect, but hoping it was something a bit different, I went along to my friends' place with camera in hand.

Arriving around 4 pm on 16 October, I was chuffed to bits that I only had to wait around 30 minutes for the mystery bird to appear. It was catching insects as it flitted between the trees and fence line, sometimes even feeding on the ground. What caught my eye was the quickness of flight and the colour of the bird – it had a grey neck with a yellow underbelly and, when in flight, orange flashing under the tail and beautiful white stripes on the wings.

It turned out that this special-looking visitor had first been seen in their garden on 13th, so it was three days before I got over to take some photos. It wasn't seen again after 16th, meaning my visit was just in time.

I managed to take four photos of the bird. The challenge now was to see if we could identify what it was. If I had known it was so special, I would have stayed and tried to get some better shots, but I guess we are all wiser after the event.

My search for an answer began online and soon we were sort of thinking it could well be a Great Crested Flycatcher or something similar – but, not knowing birds very well, it was only a guess. We were in agreement that it was a really cool little bird but had no idea just how special it was until, a few days later, I got in touch with a good friend who is really into his birds. I asked him if he knew what it was. He thought the same as us – that it was a Great Crested Flycatcher. What we didn't know was that it had never been seen before in Shetland! That was a big surprise to us and it was great to share the excitement of the find and photos with him.

Later that night, to my surprise, I saw a post from BirdGuides pop up on social media, which reported that a Great Crested Flycatcher had been seen in Shetland – and that it was also the first time this species has been seen in Britain and indeed anywhere in Europe. Finding out that the bird was from eastern North America was even more surprising! As there weren't any photos of it on the BirdGuides website, I decided to post mine so that everyone could marvel at this peerie little visitor. ■

Main Image: The Great Crested Flycatcher was a first for both Britain and the wider Western Palearctic. Its appearance this side of the Atlantic had long been anticipated.

Yank extravaganza and Arctic duck in Donegal

A stunning day of birding in Co Donegal saw *Aaron Long* connect with four Nearctic landbirds on Tory Island and then proceed to add a new species to the Irish list from the ferry home.

Finder's Report

Harlequin Duck, Co Donegal, from 9 October 2025

RECENT reports of Grey-cheeked Thrush and Red-backed Shrike on Tory Island, Co Donegal, were too good to pass up on, so on 9 October, after a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Belfast, Ian Young and I arrived at Magheraroarty Harbour and awaited the 40-minute ferry across to Tory. We met up with Robert Vaughan, who was also heading over for the day.

Ian and I headed in the direction of the 'East End Garden', where the thrush was periodically attending a ground feeder set up by Anton Meenan. We set up camp. Ian quickly sighted the thrush as it popped out, allowing brief but excellent views before it scuttled back into the undergrowth.

Hungry for another new bird, Ian and I headed back to the shrike site in the hope that it was still present. Minutes before we were planning to leave, we saw two smallish pale birds fly into the garden, as if from nowhere. Quickly getting our optics and cameras trained on one, we realised it was a Red-eyed Vireo! Not quite believing what we were seeing, I messaged Robert the picture for confirmation. A quick positive response came and within five minutes other birders had made their way to us.

After everyone had seen the vireo and the adrenaline had worn off, I was feeling peckish. I headed for the island shop, and while stocking up on enough snacks to see me through to dinner, a message from Robert came through to say he had another Red-eyed Vireo around the football pitches!

On arrival, and still munching on Taytos, I had great views of the bird, although directions were confusing, as if people were watching more than one vireo. Could that be the case? Yes, it was! While Robert watched one perched on the goal net, other birders were still trained on another in nearby trees. After this, Anton gave Robert a lift back to the original location to confirm that the first bird was still present.

After an exhilarating day on Tory, Ian and I boarded the 4.30 pm ferry back to the mainland, with Robert on the 5 pm fast ferry. Both boats arrived back in Magheraroarty at the same time.

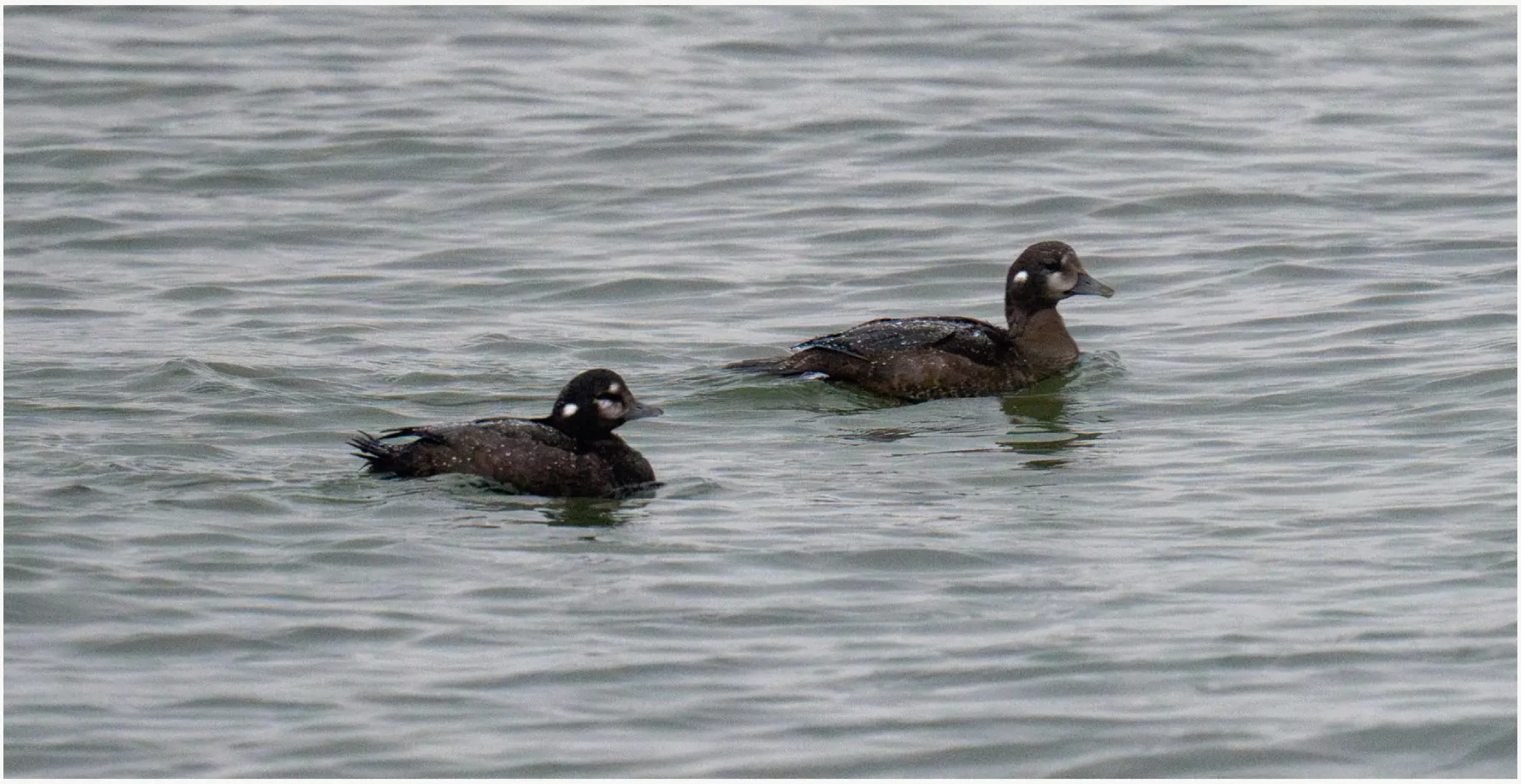
As we walked down the pier, a flock of eight Common Eider and two smaller duck were sighted. These looked interesting but were asleep, their heads tucked beneath their wings, so we walked closer. We needed the birds to become active again to clinch an ID.

Cameras and bins were at the ready, waiting on the birds to stir from their slumber, when suddenly two heads popped out. Immediately, we realised there were two Harlequin Duck floating metres away from us. I shouted a profanity as this had been a bird I had longed to see and dipped on a few times before on a trip to Canada. Although I was shocked, I hadn't registered the importance of the record until Robert exclaimed: "That's a first for Ireland!"

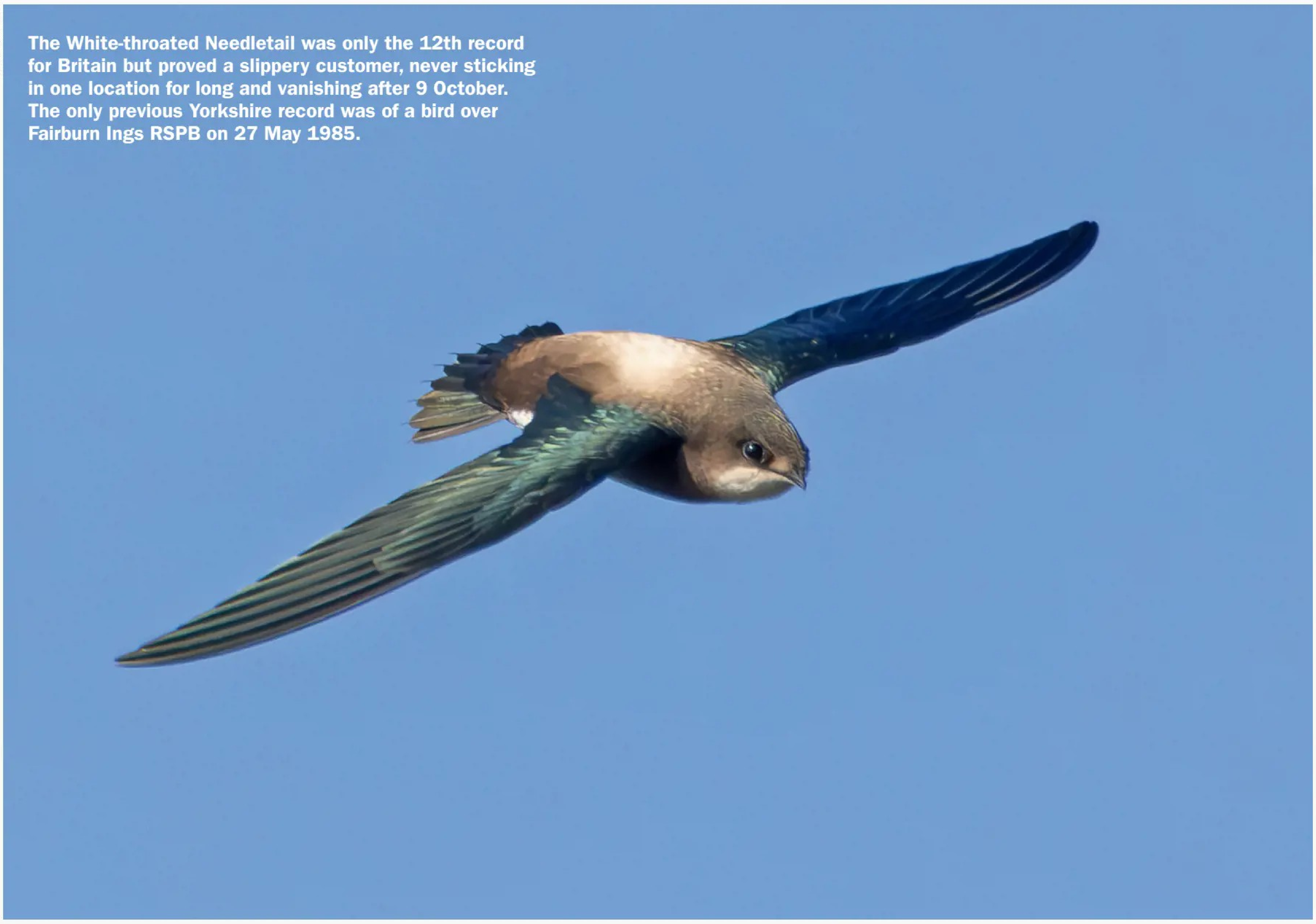
We looked at each other in disbelief for a second before realising we needed to get the news out. It was late in the day and the light was fading fast, but news was shared within a minute of the ID being made. We watched the birds feeding for the next 10 minutes before suddenly they took flight and headed out of the harbour.

We spread out to search but were unable to pick the birds up again in the failing light. Surely, we wouldn't be the only three to see them? Thankfully, the next morning, both birds were located in the harbour before one pulled a disappearing act. The remaining duck has been moving up and down the coastline in a generally westerly direction since. What an incredible day it was! ■

Below: The two Harlequin Duck represented a long-overdue first for Ireland and were subsequently twitched by all of the country's top listers. One bird was still present at the end of October.



AARON LONG



SAM VILES

The White-throated Needletail was only the 12th record for Britain but proved a slippery customer, never sticking in one location for long and vanishing after 9 October. The only previous Yorkshire record was of a bird over Fairburn Ings RSPB on 27 May 1985.

A swift relocation!

***Mandy Gregory (MG)* and *Ray Maddison* discuss a routine visit to Tophill Low NR that transformed into an unforgettable day when a White-throated Needletail appeared, while *Ashley Saunders (AS)* describes the bird's remarkable relocation at Bempton Cliffs RSPB.**

Finders' Report

White-throated Needletail, multiple sites, North Yorkshire and East Yorkshire, 8-10 October 2025

MG: On Wednesday 8 October 2025, we were up early for another morning visit to Tophill Low. While sitting in the Back-to-Back Hide, I caught a glimpse of a bird that I initially thought could have been a Merlin, though the view was too brief to confirm. With nothing showing, we decided to move on. Walking along the main path around O Reservoir towards the Southeast Hide at 8.30 am, I saw the bird again – this time more clearly.

We realised it wasn't a Merlin but a type of swift. Knowing that locally breeding Common Swifts had long departed for the year, we initially assumed it must be an Alpine Swift, noting the white on its throat and the underside of its tail. We failed to notice at the time whether there was any white on the chest but watched the bird circling above us for 20 minutes before losing sight of it. We took plenty of photos, hoping for at least some useable record shots.

Before leaving, we logged the sighting as an Alpine Swift and informed Richard Hampshire, the site's Nature Reserve Adviser, showing him one of our photos. Richard quickly noted the lack of white on the chest and identified the bird as a White-throated Needletail. Unfortunately, we had just left the site by the time he confirmed the identification.

After a few searches online, we realised the significance of the morning's events, finding and photographing such an exceptionally rare visitor.

AS: Our East Yorkshire tour group arrived at Flamborough Head lighthouse mid-afternoon. Not long after we arrived, news reached us of a White-throated Needletail seen briefly at Tophill Low, some 24 km away in a straight line but an hour by road. The bird had departed, and so we dismissed the idea of going.

After checking the lighthouse with one eye on the sky, I took the group to Bempton Cliffs RSPB. The high cliffs there could yet be a draw to any errant vagrant swift in the area.

Half an hour after we arrived, a Barn Owl appeared. We watched it drift south over the path, and as our gaze followed the owl, group member Babs York yelled out the immortal word: "swift!"

Amazingly, given the brevity of the sighting, everyone in the group had got on the bird, which showed a square tail, white vent and silver back as it cruised north along the clifftop and disappeared below Bartlett Nab. It was the White-throated Needletail!

Panic set in. After half an hour of waiting for it to reappear, we were ready to give up but I thought I'd have one more look. As I glanced back over the watchpoint, a pocket-rocket zoomed like a missile up from the cliffs below and right over our heads – there it was, the White-throated Needletail! We put out an update that it was still present and helped get as many birders on it as we could before locals appeared and the pressure was off. ■

From dove dip to delight

Twelve years after dipping a Mourning Dove on Rum, *Keith Pellow* struck gold on his annual autumn trip to Scilly with an archipelago and English first.

Finder's Report

Mourning Dove, St Agnes, Scilly, 7-16 October 2025

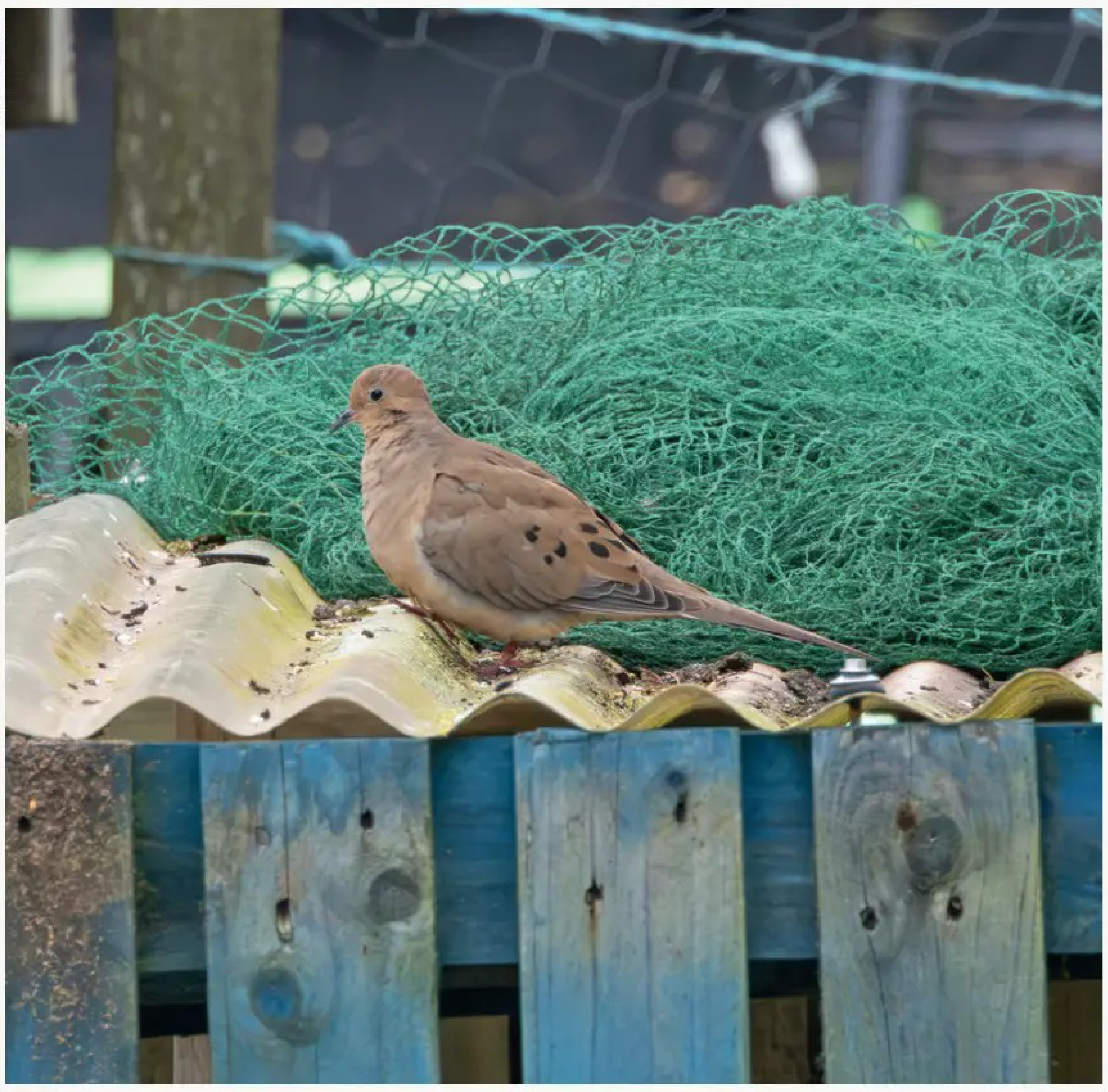
ALL birders know that birding brings both highs and lows. After more than 60 years in the field, I've certainly had my share of both.

One of my most memorable lows came in 2013, when I dipped the long-staying Mourning Dove on Rum, Highland – a trip all the way from Cornwall, no less. Ever since, the species has been high on my wish list in a British context.

In October 2025, I made my annual autumn visit to the Isles of Scilly. While I was there, the approach of Storm Amy raised hopes that something from across the Atlantic might make landfall. On 7 October, my partner Louise and I decided to visit St Agnes. By mid-afternoon we had enjoyed excellent views of both a Hoopoe and an American Pipit, along with the long-staying Spotted Sandpiper.

Reaching the last field above Troy Town Farmhouse, I noticed what appeared to be two doves feeding together. One was clearly a European Turtle Dove, while the other, though noticeably paler, I initially assumed to be a juvenile turtle dove. Curious, I took a few record shots.

On reviewing the photos, I knew instantly what I was looking at – a Mourning Dove! It hit me immediately that this was huge – not only a first for Scilly but also for England.



SAM VILES

All five Mourning Doves recorded in Britain previously have been on remote Scottish isles and generally very hard to twitch, making Keith's find on St Agnes all the more exceptional.

We stepped back from the hedge to avoid disturbance and hastily drafted a WhatsApp message. Moments later, we returned to find the birds gone. Despite an extensive search there was no further sign that day.

Fortunately, on the third morning, Steve Brayshaw relocated the dove near Lower Town Farm, allowing birders and day-trippers to enjoy this exceptional find. With Mourning Dove now firmly on my British list, it just goes to show that, in birding, even the lowest of lows can become the highest of highs. ■

Siberian Thrush stuns on Shetland

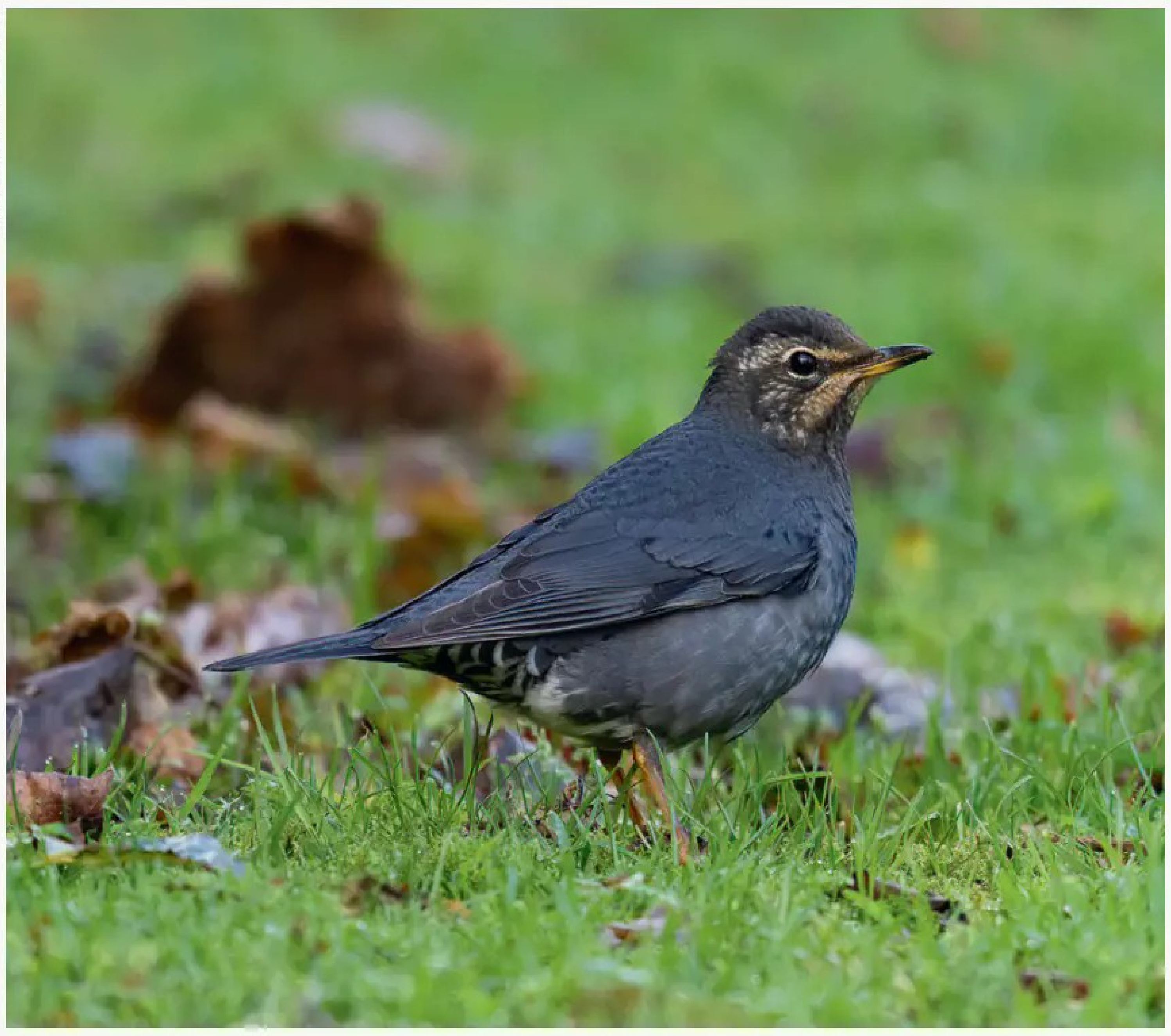
A thermal scan and 10 extraordinary seconds led to the discovery of one of Shetland's most thrilling rarities of 2025 for *Simon Nichols* and his crew.

Finder's Report

Siberian Thrush, Loch of Asta, Shetland, 2-10 October 2025

AFTER many years of searching for birds on Scilly, I finally took the plunge and headed north for my first Shetland autumn in 2012. I was hooked. But it wasn't until 2019 that our established crew really came together. There have been additions along the way, and it felt very apt that for the first time ever in 2025, Russell Ness, Jon Holt, Dave Carter, Mark Baker, Matt Slaymaker, Hasan Al-Farhan and I were all together in Scalloway.

On Thursday 2 October, I suggested we check the isolated bushes alongside Loch of Asta, four minutes north of Scalloway. As I reached the end of the hut, I scanned the bushes with my thermal. A thrush-sized head appeared in a nearby elder bush, some 7 m away. I lowered the thermal and raised my binoculars.



GRAHAM JEPSON

With only 14 previous British records, the male Siberian Thrush found by Simon and his crew proved hugely popular when it stuck around, becoming the first Shetland individual to stay for multiple days.

Staring back at me through the misty drizzle was a Siberian Thrush! I only saw the head before it turned left, clocked me and dropped out of sight. It all happened in 10 unforgettable seconds.

This was a team find – everyone played a part in securing views, photos and getting the news out. As dusk fell, I returned alone. Through the thermal, the thrush appeared again in the elder. It hung around and was enjoyed by many birders in the following days. ■

KIT DAY

October was a brilliant month for rare shrikes, with this dashing male Red-tailed Shrike putting in a nine-day stay on the Suffolk coast from 2nd. Due to identification difficulties with first-winter birds in the isabelline shrike complex, the records committees' stance is currently to accept only adult birds to species level, making individuals such as this especially popular with twitchers.

Rarity rush

Thrilling finds came from all directions in a month that produced plenty of excitement for twitchers, as *Sam Viles* discusses.

Highlights at a glance

2-10th	Siberian Thrush at Asta, Shetland
2-10th	Red-tailed Shrike at Dunwich Heath, Suffolk
5th	Black-billed Cuckoo found dead at Ilfracombe, Devon
6-14th	Northern Parula at Firkeel, Co Cork
7-16th	Mourning Dove on St Agnes, Scilly
8-15th	White-throated Needletail in East Yorkshire and Highland
From 9th	Two Harlequin Duck at Magheraroarty, Co Donegal
13-14th	Veery on Islay, Argyll
13-16th	Great Crested Flycatcher near Tingwall, Shetland
20-22nd	Black-faced Bunting at Spurn, East Yorkshire
20-22nd	Eastern Nightingale at Rattray Head, Aberdeenshire
21st	Black-faced Bunting on Shetland
21-22nd	Eyebrowed Thrush on St Mary's, Scilly
22nd	Rufous-tailed Robin on North Ronaldsay, Orkney
28th	Siberian Rubythroat on North Ronaldsay
From 29th	Isabelline Shrike at Carne, Co Wexford

Britain and Ireland
October 2025

WHILE some of the nation's very highest listers bemoaned the lack of ticks during October, there was nonetheless no shortage of megas on offer as east met west – with the month's highlights reel including some of the most sought-after 'Sibes' on the British list and a number of top-class 'Yanks' to boot.

Indeed, October produced firsts for both Britain and Ireland as well as a number of rarities not seen or twitchable for many years, providing welcome grip-backs for those listers not sat at the very top of the rankings.

Americans after Amy

A succession of transatlantic lows in the days following Storm Amy made it a great spell for Nearctic visitors. A Grey-cheeked Thrush in Co Donegal and a dead Black-billed Cuckoo in Devon were the frontrunners on 5th, followed by a first-winter female Northern Parula at Firkeel, Co Cork, the next morning. Remaining until 14th, the parula became the longest-staying Irish record.

Only two minutes after the parula broke came news of a Blackpoll Warbler on Arranmore Island, Co Donegal. It was the first of three, with others found on Unst, Shetland, and Barra, Outer Hebrides, making it the best autumn for the species since 2012.

All five Mourning Doves previously recorded in Britain have been on remote Scottish isles, making one on St Agnes, Scilly, from 7-16th a popular fixture (see page 11). Visitors to the island were also kept entertained by two American Pipits and a Spotted Sandpiper. Argyll's first Veery at Ellister, Islay, proved frustratingly elusive for two days, though belated news of a four-day Great

Crested Flycatcher on Mainland Shetland was altogether more gut-wrenching (see page 8).

Four Red-eyed Vireos in Co Donegal became the first county records of the species. Two in the Outer Hebrides included one filmed on a trail camera at Eoropie, Lewis. An excellent run of American Pipits in Ireland saw no fewer than four found, with birds in Co Clare, Co Galway, Co Waterford and Co Wexford. A new Swainson's Thrush was on Foula, Shetland.

Seawatchers at New Brighton on 4th were understandably stunned to photograph a juvenile Northern Harrier arriving in off the sea; it was a first for Cheshire. A remarkable three were found in Co Wexford, comprising a subadult male and a juvenile at Tacumshin and an additional juvenile at Cahore. Co Antrim hosted a candidate pale-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk on Rathlin Island on 18th.

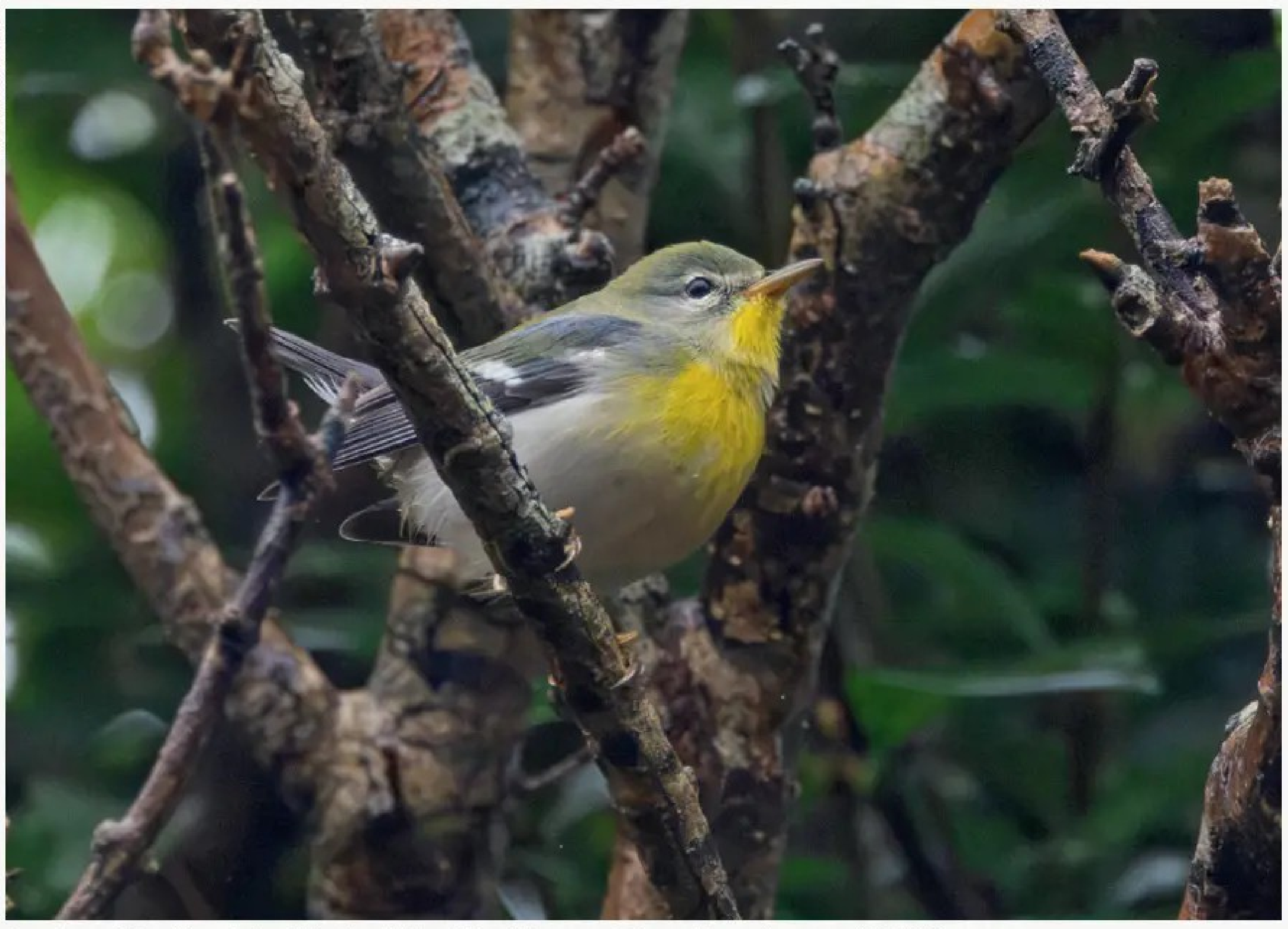
Starring shrikes

Adults of the isabelline shrike species pair are in demand since the split at the start of 2018 rendered first-winters unidentifiable in the eyes of the records committees. Both have remained very rare in the years since, so the discovery of adult male Red-tailed and Isabelline Shrikes during October proved headline news. The first Red-tailed Shrike for Suffolk at Dunwich Heath proved a popular draw, while Irish birders rejoiced in the discovery of an Isabelline Shrike at Carne, Co Wexford, on 29th. A first-winter not identifiable to species level was at Woods Mill, West Sussex.

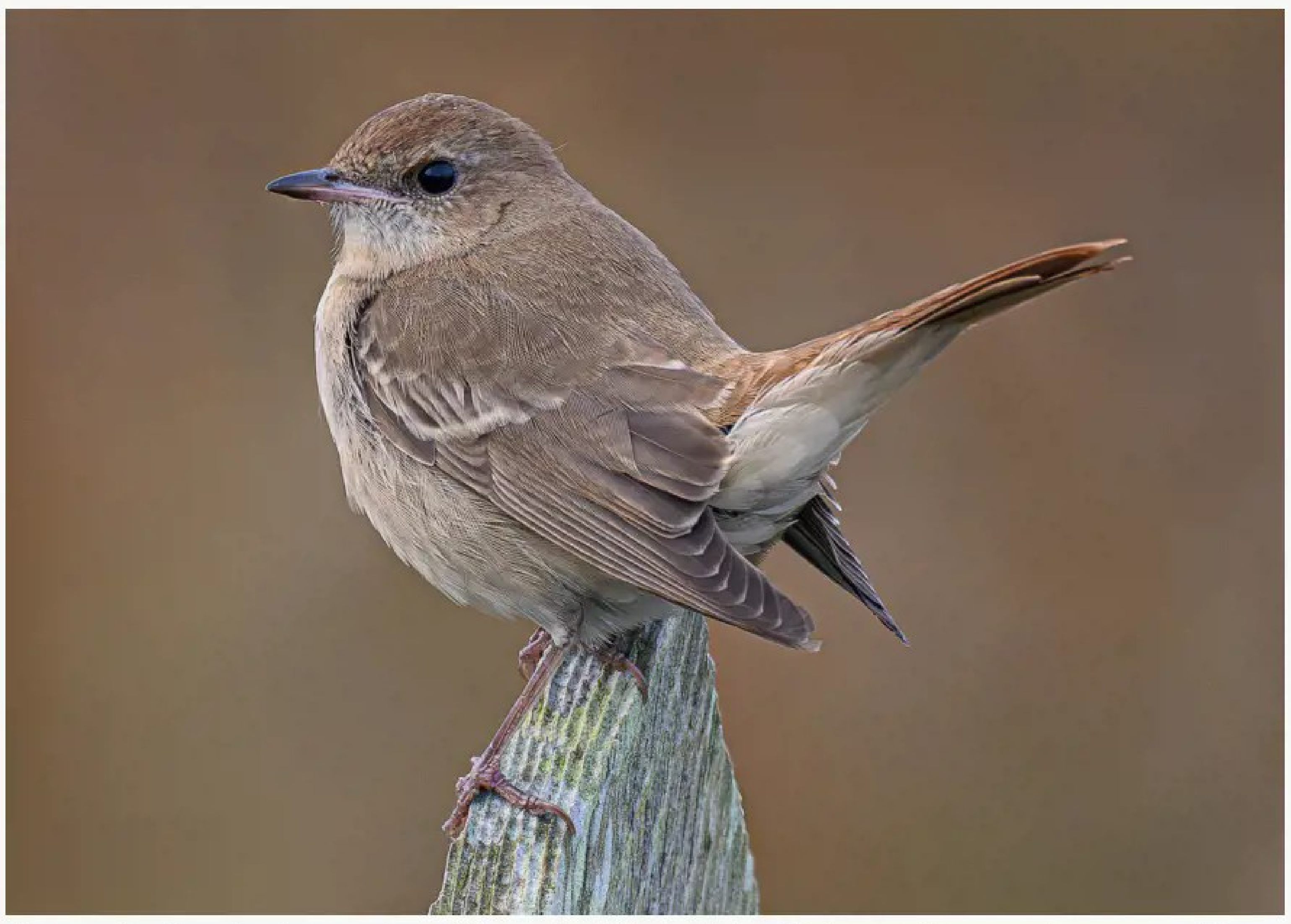
Suffolk's first Brown Shrike was at Upper Hollesley Common from 22nd. Meanwhile, a long-awaited first for Wales fell with the discovery of a first-winter at St David's, Pembrokeshire. Steppe Grey Shrikes in Cornwall and Shetland were complemented in Britain by eight nominate Great Grey Shrikes.

A first-winter male Siberian Thrush afforded crippling views in Shetland at Asta, Mainland, for nine days (see page 11), while Scilly's first Eyebrowed Thrush since 1993 was an autumn highlight for the archipelago on 21-22nd. This becomes the ninth sighting of the species in six years. White's and Black-throated Thrushes in Orkney both proved brief.

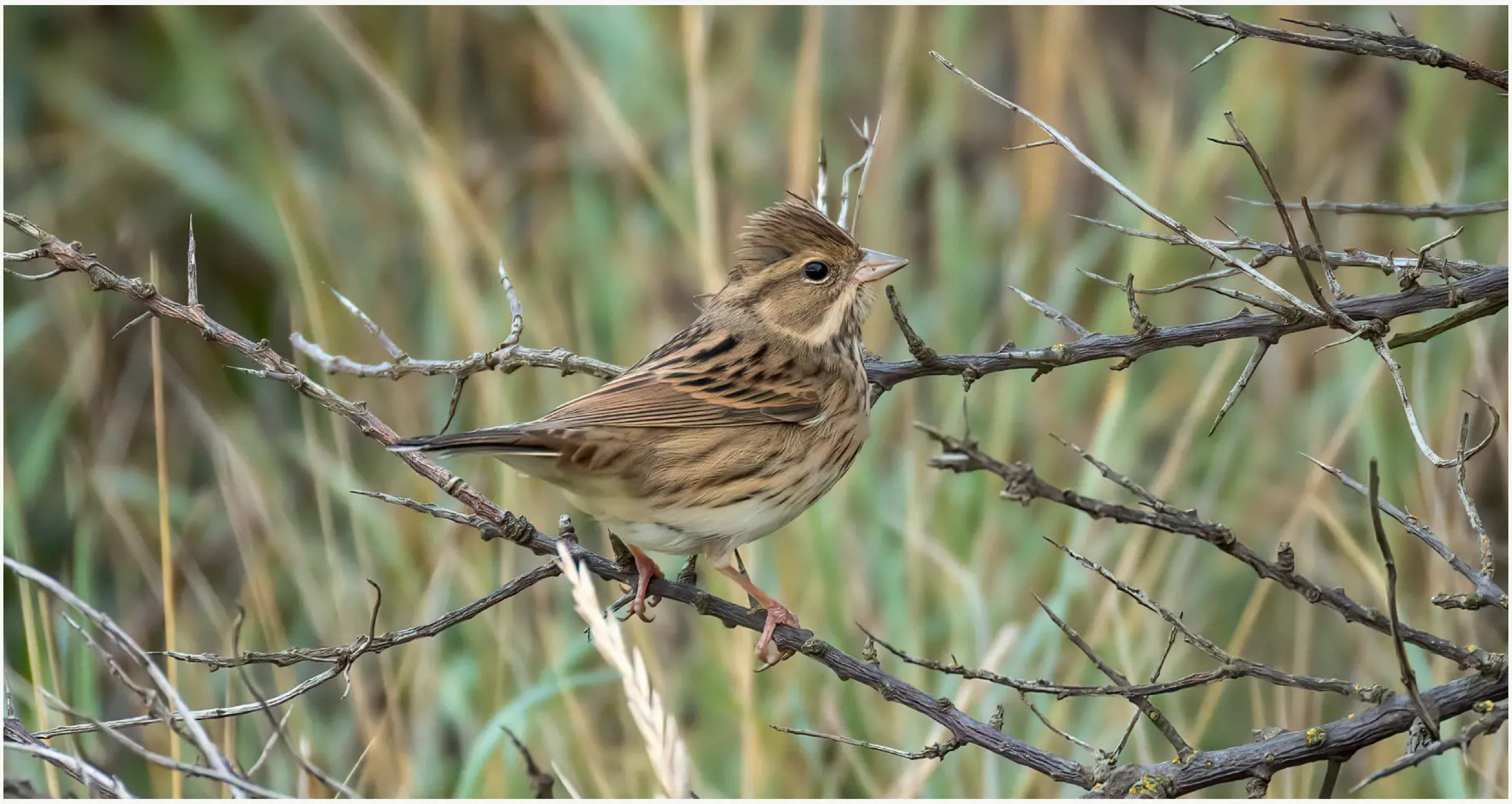
North Ronaldsay has an amazing track record for Far Eastern robins, as evidenced by the discovery of a Rufous-tailed Robin on 22nd and a Siberian Rubythroat on 28th. The robin was only seen by the finder, but the rubythroat's appearance in a mistnet allowed all on the island a chance to connect


SAM VILES

Ireland's first twitchable Northern Parula since 1983 was understandably well received. Remarkably, both that bird and this latest individual were seen at Firkeel, Co Cork. The lack of a chestnut throat spot sexes this one as a female.


RON MACDONALD

A washed-out plumage with pale-fringed tertials and coverts, as well as a long tail that was regularly cocked, identified this Common Nightingale in Aberdeenshire as the eastern form *golzii*. With only three previous British records, it was one of the month's rarest birds.


GRAHAM CATLEY

Over the past few years, the status of Black-faced Bunting has been transformed from one of the rarest Far Eastern vagrants to reach Britain to a semi-expected visitor. This subtle beauty attracted crowds to Spurn, East Yorkshire, for three days during the middle of the month.

before it was released. Fair Isle was treated to Oriental Turtle Dove, Paddyfield Warbler and Isabelline Wheatear, with another of the last species in Co Waterford representing only the third for Ireland.

Excitement on the Scottish mainland was provided by news of a first-winter Eastern Nightingale at Rattray Head, Aberdeenshire. The *golzii* form of Common Nightingale has been recorded in Britain on only three previous occasions, the most recent being in 1991. Three Red-flanked Bluetails were in eastern England. An excellent inland record involved a first-winter Siberian Stonechat north of Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire on 11-12th.

A juvenile White-throated Needletail led birders on a merry dance along the Yorkshire coast (see page 10). As hundreds of hopeful twitchers waited forlornly at Bempton Cliffs RSPB from first light on 9th, most abandoned all hope after a brief sighting over Loch of Skene, Aberdeenshire, at 9.11 am. Unexpectedly, it was back in Yorkshire over Filey that evening, with many observers finally scoring at Scarborough the next day. It was intercepted again at various sites in Highland from 13-15th.

A Pallid Swift was seen along the Yorkshire coast later in the month.

A twitchable mainland Black-faced Bunting felt long overdue so a three-day bird at Spurn, East Yorkshire, mid-month was welcome. Another appeared on Mainland Shetland. Black-headed Buntings were in Orkney and Co Galway, while a solid Rustic Bunting influx saw 10 discovered.

Two Citrine Wagtails at Kennack Sands, Cornwall, came as a surprise on 5th. A Tawny Pipit was in Co Cork. Four Red-throated, seven Olive-backed and an excellent 25 Richard's Pipits, and five Greater Short-toed Larks were all seen. An Eastern Yellow Wagtail on St Kilda, Outer Hebrides, on 15th was one of two exciting island firsts that day, the other being a Western Cattle Egret. A Brown Shrike on 1st was also a new St Kilda species.

A Lanceolated Warbler ringed at Nanjizal Valley on 14th was the first for Cornwall and an exceptionally rare English record. One on Fetlar, Shetland, was more expected. Otherwise, rare warbler totals comprised singles of Western Subalpine and Western Bonelli's, two each of Arctic and Blyth's Reed, six Hume's Leaf, 10 Dusky, 11 Radde's and 24 Pallas's.

A small influx of Northern Long-tailed Tits brought at least 10 of these white-headed beauties to Shetland. Arctic Redpoll may no longer be a full species, but two Coues's and three Hornemann's nonetheless attracted interest. Other scarce migrant landbirds nationally included four Ortolan Buntings, seven each of European Serin and Rosy Starling, eight Bluethroats, 14 Red-backed Shrikes, 16 Hoopoes and 25 Wrynecks.

CHRIS POWELL

Arguably the highlight of Scilly's October was this two-day Eyebrowed Thrush on St Mary's on 21-22nd. It was the first record of this highly desired Siberian species in the archipelago since 1993.

DYLAN DAUNT

Despite an upturn in records over the past couple of decades, any Siberian Rubythroat in Britain still causes shockwaves. This first-winter male was trapped on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, on 28th.

No fewer than seven juvenile Pallid Harriers marked another excellent month for the species, while adults in Norfolk, Glamorgan, and Pembrokeshire returned to regular wintering sites. Two Rough-legged Buzzards and three juvenile Red-footed Falcons were found in Britain.

Taigas come to tea

Given the rapid decline of the British wintering population, a run of extralimital Taiga Bean Goose records came as a surprise. No fewer than 18 in Ireland were particularly unexpected, being the first national records since 2008. Up to 27 were in Orkney, in addition to birds in Northumberland, Aberdeenshire and the Outer Hebrides.

A wandering white-morph adult Ross's Goose on the Lancashire coast jumped between arriving Icelandic Pink-footed Geese and resident feral Greylag and Canada Geese. One of five apparently wild Snow Geese in Scotland was a white-morph adult in the company of Whooper Swans on Bressay, Shetland. Whooper Swan is a regular carrier species for Snow Geese in Iceland.

Observers on Islay, Argyll, managed to locate at least two Cackling Geese among returning Barnacle Goose flocks, one of which was a potential candidate for *taverneri*, which breeds in western Canada and north-east Alaska. This form has yet to be conclusively recorded in Britain, although there have been promising candidates in the past. A Lesser Canada Goose, two Todd's Canada Geese and a presumed returning adult Red-breasted Goose were also on the island. Other Cackling Geese were in the Outer Hebrides and Co Sligo, with Black Brant at three sites.

Ridgway's Cackling and Bar-headed Geese among feral Barnacle Geese on the Suffolk coast could have originated from self-sustaining populations just across the North Sea in the Netherlands. A Lesser White-fronted Goose with Pink-feet in Lothian was confirmed as a returning bird already assigned to Category E.

Two Harlequin Duck at Magheraroarty, Co Donegal, on 9th (see page 9) represented a long-overdue Irish first and were widely enjoyed as the month wore on. After being tracked along the North-East coast north from North Yorkshire on 14th, and becoming the first record for Co Durham in the process, the returning drake Black Scoter settled back off Goswick, Northumberland, mid-month. One off Peffer Sands, Lothian, is the first county record since the first British record that was seen between 1987 and 1989.

Dorset's first Baikal Teal, a female-type, was an excellent find at Abbotsbury Swannery from 14th, though it proved trickier to see once the site closed for the winter. An adult drake Ferruginous Duck returned to the Lincolnshire Fens for the third autumn in succession; elsewhere were three White-winged Scoter, six Surf Scoter, eight American Wigeon, nine Green-winged Teal, 11 Lesser Scaup and 58 Ring-necked Duck. Co Cork's regular wintering Pacific Diver returned to Crookhaven from 15th.

Shorebirds and shearwaters

A good arrival of White-rumped Sandpipers following Storm Amy included one of the most surprising records of the year in the form of eight juveniles at Belvide Reservoir, Staffordshire, on 11th. Nine at Rosslare, Co Wexford, and five at Montrose Basin, Angus, were also notable, with a further 60 seen elsewhere.

Orkney's first Hudsonian Whimbrel reached North Ronaldsay on 2nd. It is also the first British record since 2020. One of the month's four Long-billed Dowitchers was a juvenile at Montrose Basin, Angus – the first county record for 30 years. A Tesco car park in Truro, Cornwall, provided excellent views of one of the month's 10 Lesser Yellowlegs. Other shorebirds included two Buff-breasted Sandpipers, nine Semipalmated Sandpipers, 10 Baird's Sandpipers, 25 Pectoral Sandpipers and 35 American Golden Plovers. Lothian's Marsh Sandpiper lingered until 17th.

Glossy Ibis remained across Britain and Ireland in considerable numbers, and there was a surprise late October flurry of five Black-crowned Night Herons.

Survey vessel RV *CEFAS Endeavour* bagged a Desertas-type Petrel approximately 30 km north-west of Boscastle, Cornwall, on 22nd, with another passing Ballycotton, Co Cork. On 5th, classic conditions produced dozens of Leach's Storm Petrels off Cheshire, with 239 Grey Phalaropes off Bridges of Ross, Co Clare, the previous day. Black-browed Albatrosses were reported off Cape Clear, Co Cork, and Cley-next-the-Sea, Norfolk.

A surprise late push of large shearwaters off Strumble Head, Pembrokeshire, included 1,623 Great Shearwaters on 24th – shattering the previous Welsh record day count – while 313 Cory's Shearwaters set a new record for that species.

The arrival of four Bonaparte's Gulls at Dunnet Bay, Caithness, is the largest group ever recorded in Britain. A further five Bonaparte's were seen elsewhere, as were single Franklin's, two Laughing and five Ring-billed Gulls. The Forster's Tern crossed from Dorset to the north French coast, before resurfacing off Lizard Point, Cornwall. A Gull-billed Tern was in Lincolnshire and White-winged Terns were in Denbighshire and Northumberland. ■

DOUGIE PRESTON

Late October brought a welcome influx of ultra-cute Northern Long-tailed Tits, primarily to the Northern Isles. British sightings of these white-headed beauties have been few and far between in recent times.

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Vagrants galore!

Record-breaking influxes, national firsts and a multitude of megas ensured it was an October for the ages across the region, as *Sam Viles* reports.

Western Palearctic
October 2025

A record-breaking arrival of Nearctic passerines in Iceland left birders across Europe casting envious glances north. Eleven species were found there during October, with Bobolink, Philadelphia Vireo and Brown-headed Cowbird all representing Icelandic firsts.

The cowbird was found by a visiting American birder on 24th and looked right at home as it hoovered up breadcrumbs under benches in Reykjavík. It later transpired to have been present since 11th. The day after news of the cowbird broke brought a post on Facebook from a homeowner in Tjarnabyggð, attached to which were photos of a male Varied Thrush! This was a welcome grip-back for those who missed the Iceland's first record in May 2004.

South-west Iceland snagged the majority of 'Yanks', with Hermit Thrush, Alder Flycatcher, Tennessee Warbler, two Myrtle Warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Bobolink, American Pipit and eight Red-eyed Vireos (a new record annual total) also on offer. However, it was Höfn in the south-east that produced one of the rarest landbirds in the form of a Philadelphia Vireo on 6th. Greater Yellowlegs and Sora were further highlights in the country.

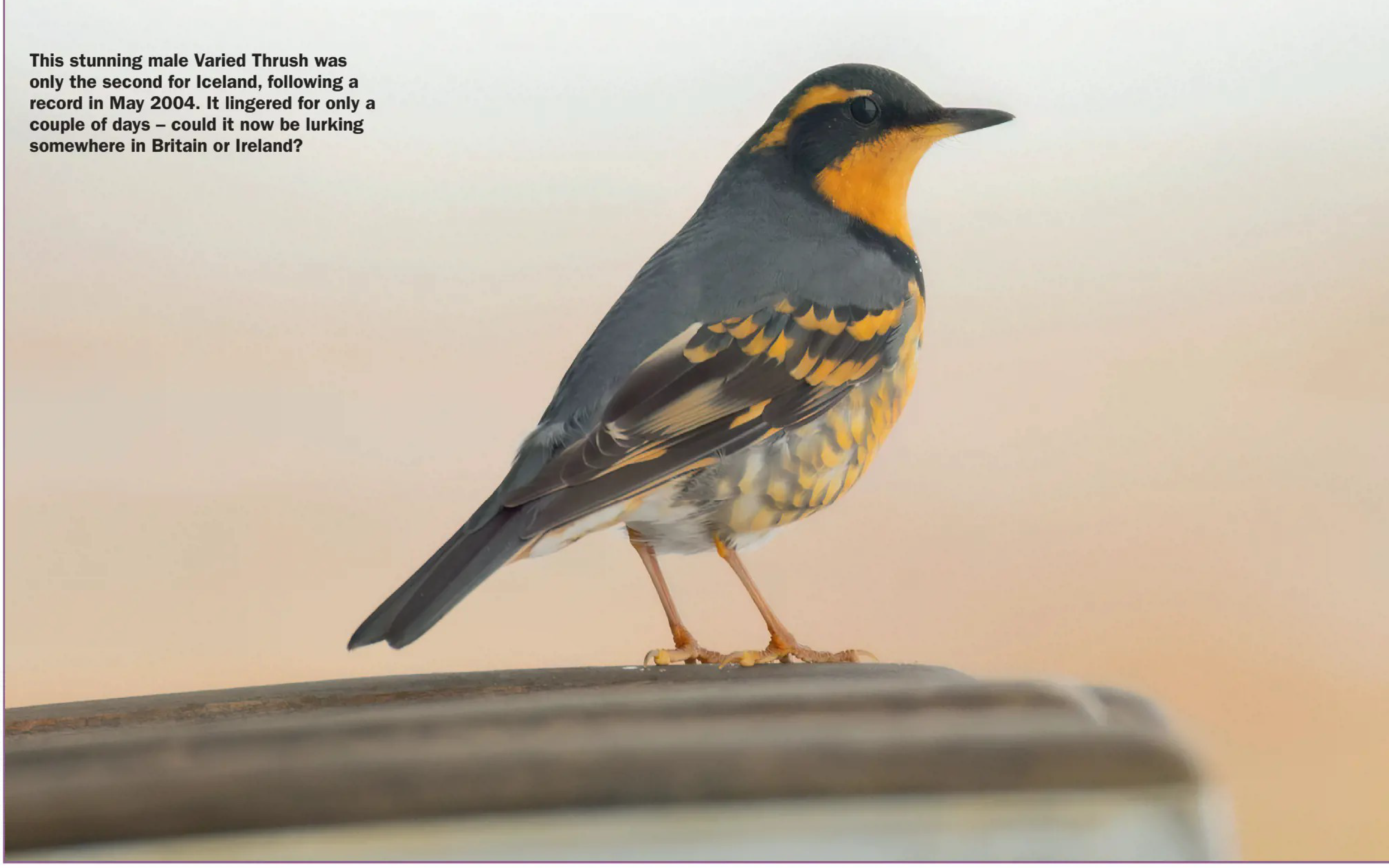
In the Azores, Corvo once again dominated the news. A significant fall on 16th saw birders treated to two Ruby-crowned Kinglets, the autumn's second Prothonotary Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Cape May Warbler, two Northern Parulas, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and American Goshawk – the last presumed to be the 2024 bird returning.

Naturally, these were just the tip of the iceberg, with Corvo's October roll-call also including Magnolia, Blackpoll, Tennessee, and American Yellow Warblers, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush, American Redstart, Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Bobolink, Scarlet Tanager, Indigo Bunting, Grey-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, American Pipit, American Cliff Swallow and Trindade Petrel.

A Dickcissel on neighbouring Flores was twitched by several birders from Corvo, with the larger island also racking up records of Black-and-white and American Yellow Warblers, Ovenbird, Common Yellowthroat, Northern Waterthrush, Bobolink, Scarlet Tanager, American Cliff Swallow, three Chimney Swifts, Yellow-billed Cuckoo and Pied-billed Grebe. Elsewhere in the archipelago, Belted Kingfisher on São Miguel, American Coot on Terceira and multiple Northern Harriers, Snowy Egrets, and Green and Great Blue Herons were all noted.

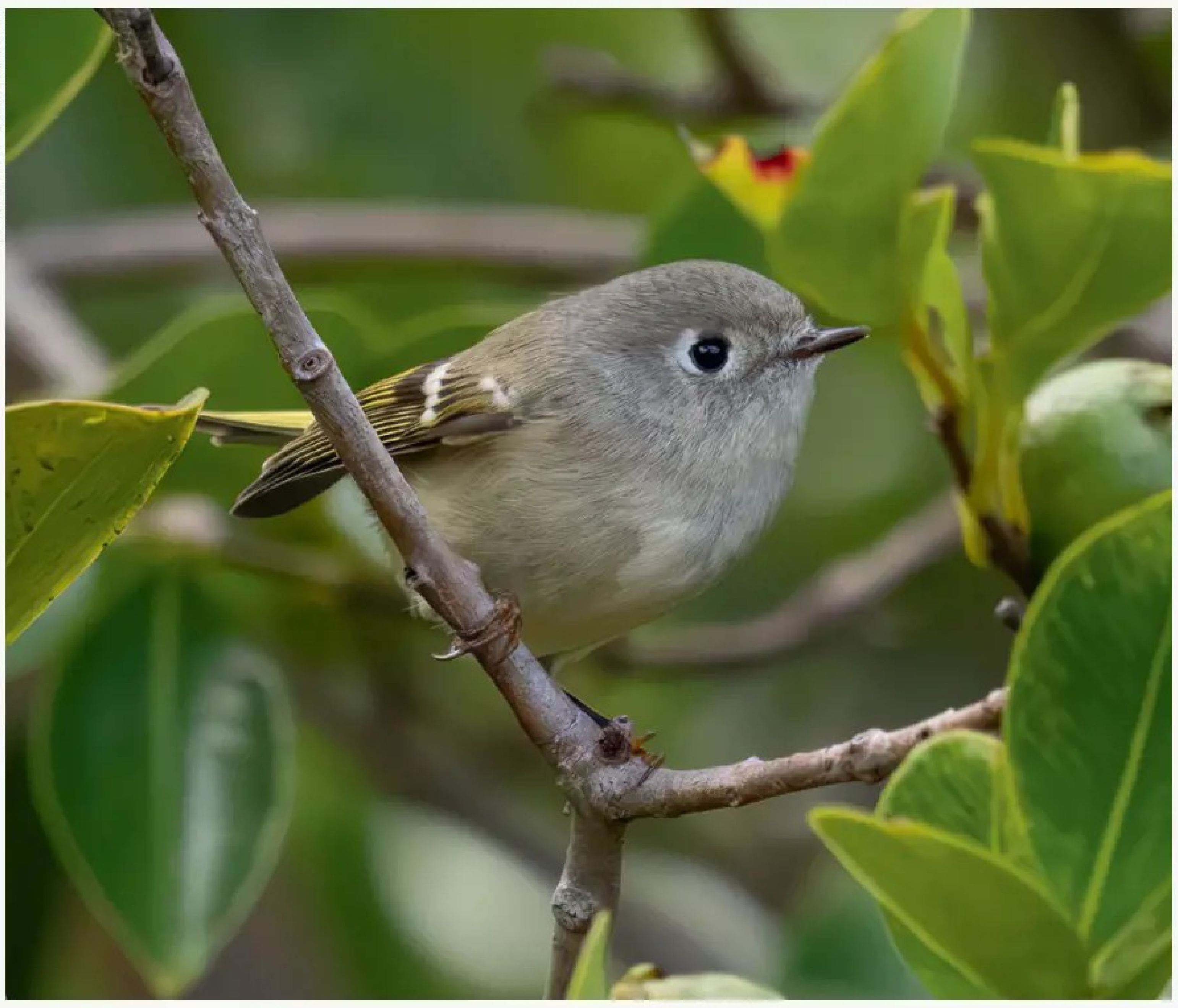
Nevlunghavn on Norway's south coast played unlikely host to the nation's first Tennessee Warbler, which was trapped and ringed on 17th. Meanwhile, a Swainson's Thrush made it to Røst and an Upland Sandpiper arrived on Sørvågen. A Scarlet Tanager on Vágar on 16th was a first for the Faroe Islands.

Continuing the Nearctic theme, a first-winter Bay-breasted Warbler trapped at Ouaisne Common, Jersey, on 9th, where it lingered for two further days. This was unsurprisingly a first for the Channel Islands and only the third European record away from Corvo.



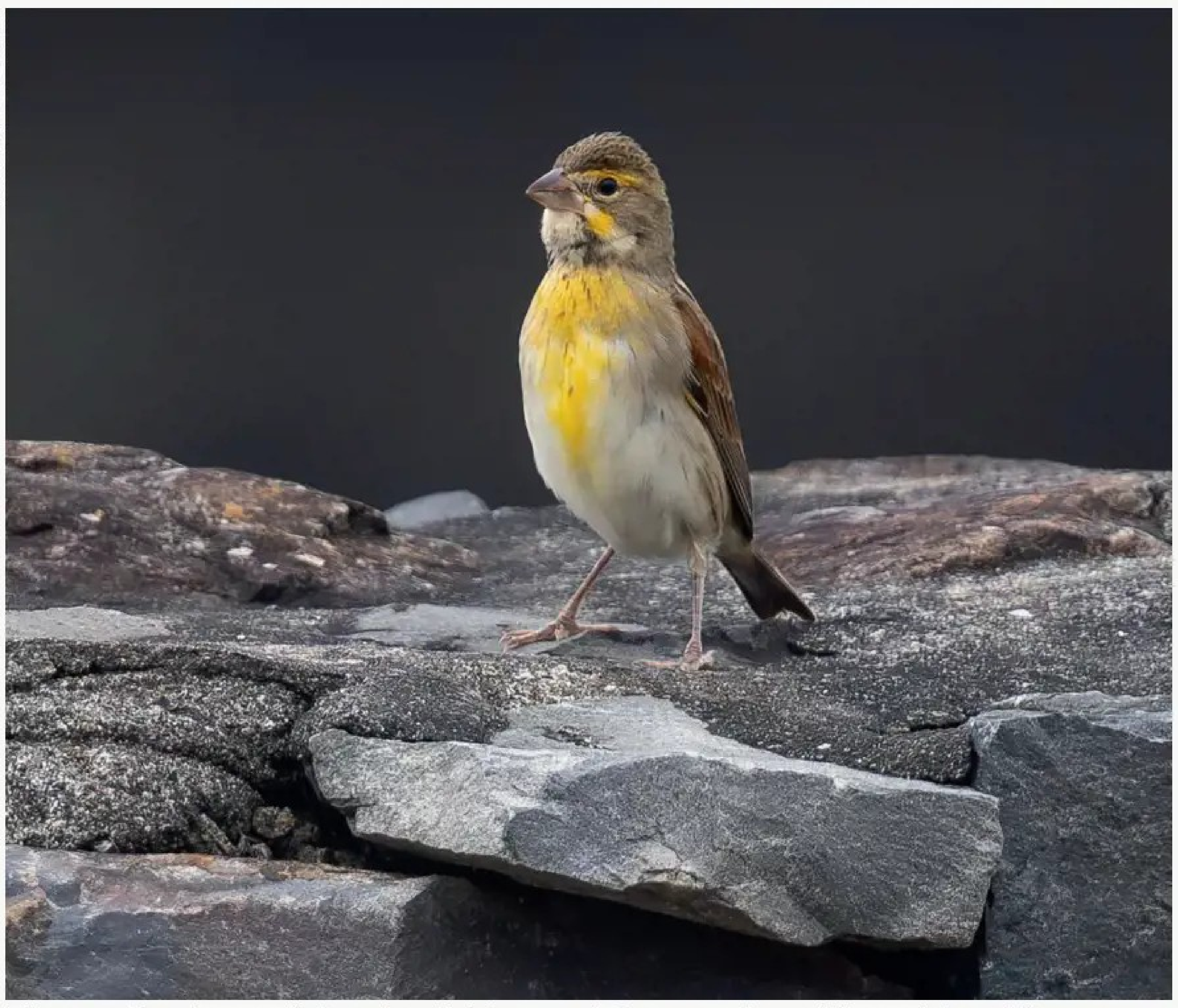
This stunning male Varied Thrush was only the second for Iceland, following a record in May 2004. It lingered for only a couple of days – could it now be lurking somewhere in Britain or Ireland?

ÞORFINNUR SIGURGEIRSSON



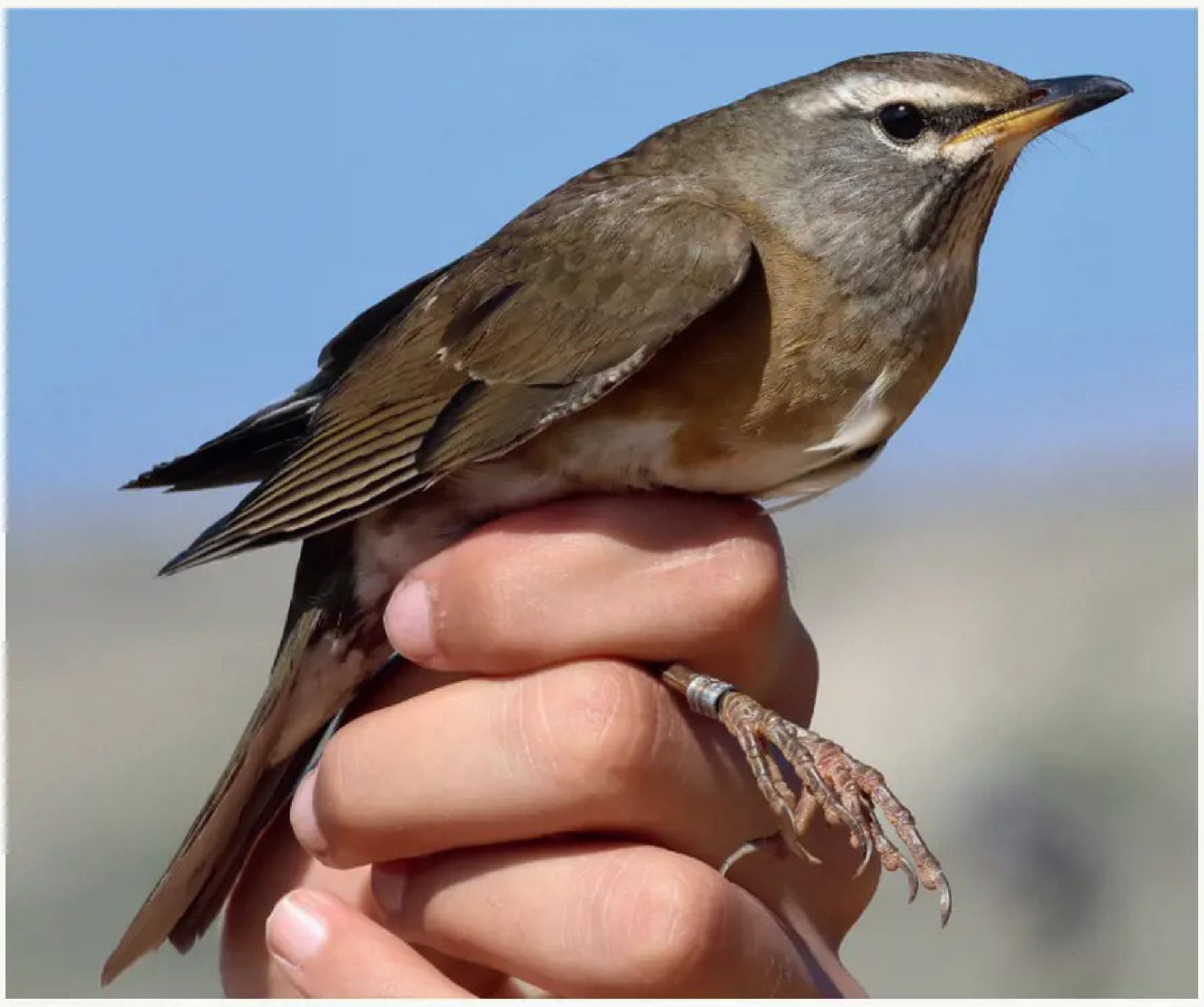
VINCENT LEGRAND

Corvo had an outstanding month, with at least two Ruby-crowned Kinglets among the many highlights there. This species was a tick for almost all the top WP listers visiting the island.



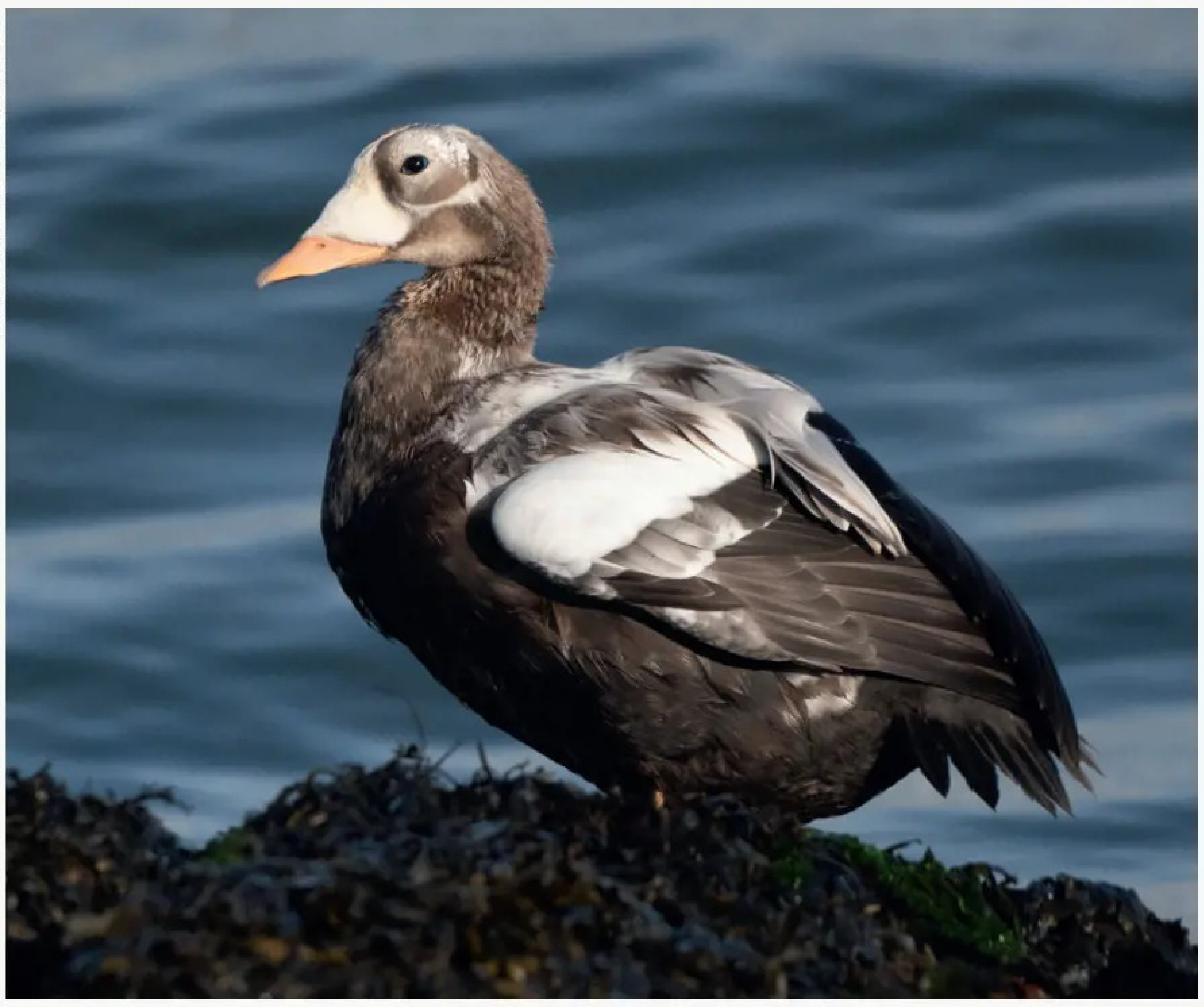
MATHIEU BALLY

Flores, the larger island neighbour of Corvo, also chipped in with some heavyweight sightings. This beautiful Dickcissel was found on 6th and put in an extended stay. It represented the 11th regional record.



NICHOLAS GALEA

Malta enjoyed visits from exciting eastern vagrants in October. This Eyebrowed Thrush was trapped and ringed at an undisclosed site on 20th; it was followed by the country's first Steppe Grey Shrike on 31st.



ARNOUD VAN DEN BERG

Birders across Europe celebrated the return of the Spectacled Eider to Texel, the Netherlands. The bird, still in moult, gave point-blank views along its favoured stretch of coastline during the month.

Another memorable October for the French hot-spot of Ouessant peaked a Swainson's Thrush as well as two Black-faced Buntings, and two Red-eyed Vireos and no fewer than three American Pipits. Pointe-du-Raz held a Blackpoll Warbler, with another Swainson's Thrush on Molène and an American Pipit at Damgan. A third Black-faced Bunting on Noirmoutier rounded off a record-breaking month for a species with only two French records prior to 2025. Wandering Steppe and Eastern Imperial Eagles were in the north of the country (the former even crossed water to Ouessant on one occasion) and the regular Forster's Tern returned to Brittany.

The first Yellow-billed Cuckoo for Cape Verde was a brilliant find on Sal, while Western Willet and Hudsonian Whimbrel resided on Boa Vista. A juvenile Red-footed Booby was at Sagres, Portugal.

Estaca de Bares continued to cement its reputation as a top European seawatching site with Spain's first Soft-plumaged Petrel on 23rd and two Black-capped Petrels noted on 4th. Meanwhile, a Cape Verde Shearwater was off the Cádiz coast on 3rd. A sensational pair of Spanish firsts concerned Lappet-faced Vulture and Greater Hoopoe-Lark in Andalusia. A Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was in Catalonia, and the Cape Gull remained in Cantabria.

Exciting news for birders across Europe saw the drake Spectacled Eider return to Texel, the Netherlands, on 7th. It was joined on the island by a grey-morph Gyr Falcon and a first-winter Steppe Grey Shrike. Additional Dutch sightings consisted of Siberian Rubythroat, Black-faced Bunting, Lesser Spotted Eagle and a dead White's Thrush. An adult Pacific Diver off IJmuiden and Schiermonnikoog was only the country's second record following a juvenile earlier this year.

There were plenty of national firsts this month, these including Surf Scoter and two Olive-backed Pipits in Latvia, Manx Shearwater in Czechia, Ring Ouzel in Belarus, Long-billed Dowitcher and West African Crested Tern in Türkiye, White's Thrush in Israel and Hooded Vulture in Tunisia, plus the first and second Little Buntings for Albania. Georgia's first Asian Desert Warbler was at Gonio and its second Three-banded Plover at Batumi. Hungary racked up its second Purple Sandpiper and third Armenian Gull. Ringers at Espoo trapped Finland's fourth Siberian Rubythroat on 17th, with a Little Curlew photographed on Öland, Sweden. A Lesser Kestrel was in Norway.

An adult Verreaux's Eagle in Jordan later relocated to and settled around Nahal Atek, Israel. Blyth's Pipit and two Lesser Flamingos were in Kuwait. Finally, an Eyebrowed Thrush was trapped and ringed in Malta. ■

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DAVID CAMPBELL

Of nightingales and neighbours

What happens when a rare bird lands in the wrong garden? Our columnist explores how a moment of tension became a lesson in understanding.

RON MACDONALD

The Eastern Nightingale in Aberdeenshire this autumn caused brief tension between birders and landowners.

The bird I found most gripping this autumn was the Eastern Nightingale in Aberdeenshire. Although *golzii* is not currently recognised as a species in its own right, and close scrutiny of the bird's appearance introduced some debate regarding the identification, it clearly was not of the nominate form. It was obvious that it had come from far away to flick its long tail on a coastal garden fence. In any case, even a 'standard' Common Nightingale would have been a big deal in Scotland.

Alongside debate about the bird's subspecific identity, it was hard to miss the chat around what had become an unexpectedly delicate viewing situation. The bird had chosen the garden by the car park at Rattray Head, a well-known parcel of habitat for migrants, regularly checked by local birders. In recent years, the spot has also pulled in the likes of Dark-eyed Junco, Greenish Warbler and Red-backed Shrike, to name a few standout highlights.

One of the residents of the property was not expecting a small crowd of birders to be stationed outside, hoping for a look at a vagrant nightingale, and there were reports of birders being confronted, a fire being started near the bird's hangout, and the police being called in response to the modest twitch.

Birders are well accustomed to the delicate considerations around rarities in more urban settings, often involving cases of a bird pitching up in someone's garden and the only hope of a view being to loiter on residential roads with intent. However, this instance of a clash between a resident and birders in a relatively remote, natural setting, with an adjacent public car park, was more surprising.

Charm offensive

It reminded me of when I was briefly birding a 'lighthouse garden' during a day out on the coast, for the umpteenth time that autumn. Regular reports from the plot had been mentioned online and on a nearby reserve whiteboard for years. It was even included in regional site guidebooks. I covered the perimeter under the honest understanding that it was the garden of the very public lighthouse, only to be confronted by an angry, despairing individual, who seemed to have never seen a birder in his life.

"How would you like it if I looked into your garden?"

I wasn't sure how to respond. How could this person not be aware that the garden was a known birding site? Were all these years of 'lighthouse garden' birding built on the lie that it wouldn't offend anyone?

> “There were reports of birders being confronted, a fire being started near the bird's hangout, and the police being called”

Birders looking for the nightingale on the Aberdeenshire coast gave a masterclass in this very particular branch of diplomacy. It would have been easy to react in an equal and opposing fashion, but a gentle approach was taken and an understanding conversation was eventually had with the gentleman, who was evidently far removed from the world of birding.

The charm offensive worked wonders and water instantly flowed under the bridge. Apparently, the formerly unwilling host even ended up assisting birders in their efforts to collect a faecal sample for DNA analysis, to settle the bird's identification.

An easily visible property next to public rights of way might feel fair game, but it evidently pays to remember that not all residents of such properties are expecting the bushes in their garden to host migrant birds that will attract interest. Perhaps we shouldn't feel entitled to focus our birding on such a spot without making some effort to break the ice, explain the interest and perhaps offer something as a token of appreciation. ■

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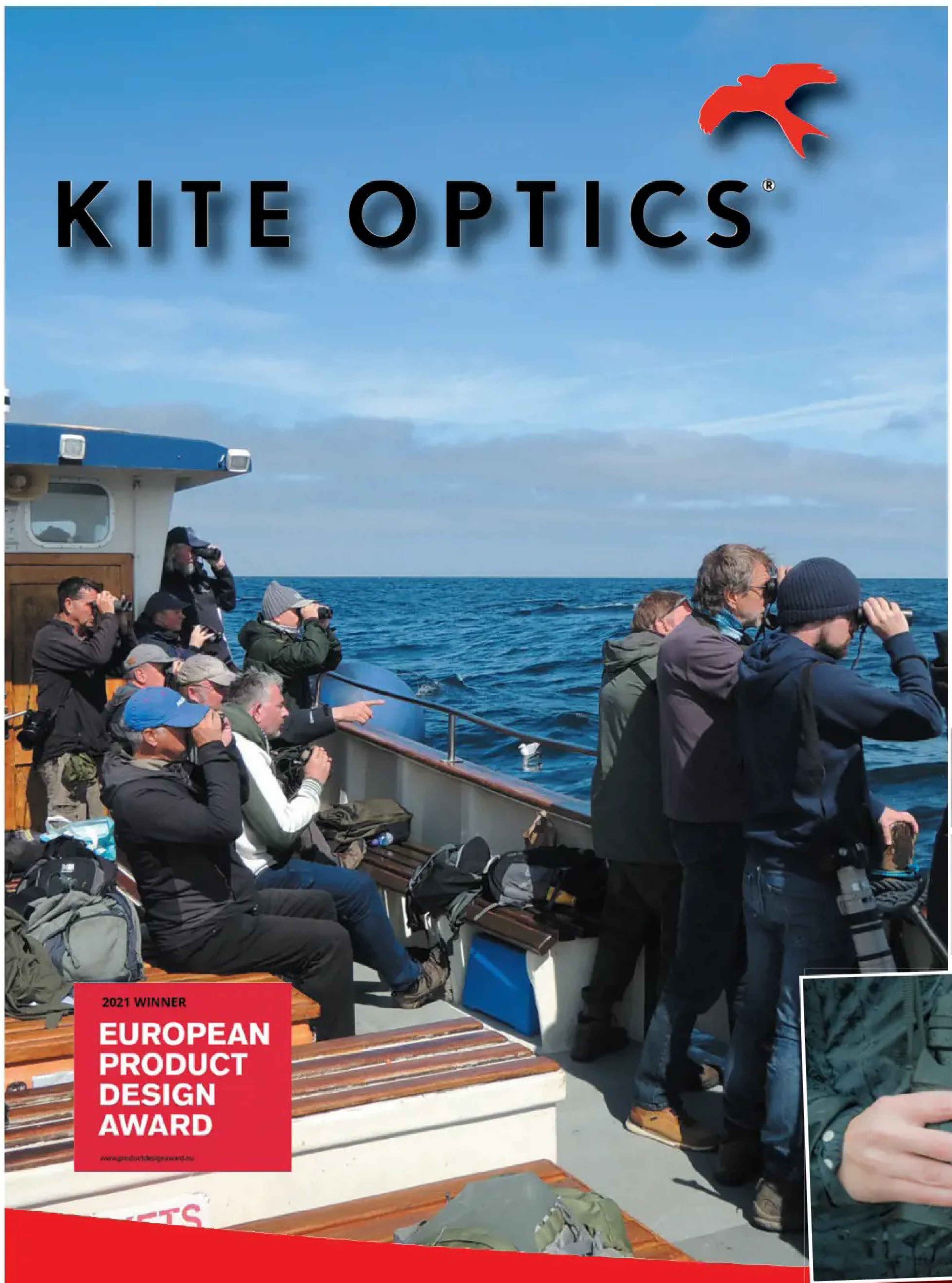

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MARK AVERY

Royal rumble

The desire of various wildlife charities to appoint a royal patron leaves our columnist slightly bemused given the various scandals over the years.

The drawn-out demise of the royal formerly known as Prince Andrew has long seemed inevitable and should prompt a wider look at the role that royalty plays in our society.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has had a royal patron for more than a century, mostly the person who I still think of as 'the' Queen, but now her eldest son, 'the' King. Despite rumours to the contrary, the royal patron has no influence on the work of the RSPB but I remember constructing diplomatic responses to long hand-written letters from Prince Charles (as he was then) back in the day.

The National Trust, WWF-UK and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust also have King Charles III as their patron, as does the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust. The British Trust for Ornithology used to have Prince Philip as patron but now has Prince William, and seemed to think that it had pulled off quite a coup in getting him when the change occurred.

The above isn't an exhaustive list but it's enough to show that one family has quite a monopoly in terms of being patrons of large UK-based wildlife-related charities. But other options are available, although those organisations that fail to hook a royal do their best to have someone with some gravitas and standing.

Sir David Attenborough is the gold standard of environmental patrons and is patron of the World Land Trust. He has supported WWF-UK over many years and just recently his video in support of The Wildlife Trusts' appeal to raise £30 million to buy an upland estate is said to have raised £500,000 in a single day. Sir David is wildlife conservation royalty and will celebrate his 100th birthday next May.

Haunted house

However, having links to the House of Windsor must surely raise more than a few eyebrows these days. Although the royal family has no formal means of influencing these organisations' conservation work, their presence as patrons makes people think that they do, or at least that they might. A grouse-shooting, pheasant-shooting, jet-setting royal family may not be completely aligned with the aims of the organisations they patronise. In other fields this might even be regarded as green-washing, where the association with a respected charity reflects well on the donor, partner or patron.

In my opinion, the late Duke of Edinburgh was the most authentic of the family. With his off-colour humour, frankness bordering on rudeness and opinions that wouldn't pass many tests of political correctness, Prince Philip was a genuine character.

ANDREW PARSONS (KENSINGTON PALACE)

The Prince of Wales visits a conservation project on Dartmoor, Devon, with Tony Juniper of Natural England.

> "Instead of asking a question, the Duke simply stared straight at me as we held hands in a frozen handshake"

Many RSPB staff had uncomfortable encounters with Philip. Mine was at an event at Pensthorpe, where HRH was the guest of honour and small groups of us were presented to him for a quick chat. Instead of asking a question, the Duke simply stared straight at me as we held hands in a frozen handshake, before he moved on.

Others asked what the icy reception was all about and I simply said: "Hen Harriers at Sandringham." Anyway, I nonetheless respected him more for showing his displeasure at the RSPB's major role in highlighting and publicising the witnessed deaths of two Hen Harriers at Dersingham Bog on 24 October 2007. No one has been brought to justice for those events. There have been other incidents, too, such as the conviction of a Sandringham gamekeeper for the maiming of a Tawny Owl in a trap in November 2006.

Would RSPB members vote to keep a royal patron? I think they might well do. But would I? No, I wouldn't. ■

Bountiful borderland

With a constant stream of rarities on tap, ***Alan Tilmouth*** reflects on four decades of superb birding in his beloved home county of Northumberland.

Northumberland is a splendid county in which to live and bird. Holding a roughly central position on the east coast, butting up to the Scottish border, it is England's least densely populated county. Its land borders have been redrawn and much fought over through the centuries and have been influenced by successive waves of arrivals, from Romans through Vikings to the more recent ideas of 20th-century politicians creating local power structures.

For birders these boundaries can be simplified. The Northumberland recording area covers all that lies north of the mighty River Tyne up to the current Scottish border and includes the metropolitan borough of North Tyneside and the city of Newcastle upon Tyne.

Northumberland has been my home for 60 years and bird memories began with early childhood forays into the Cheviot Hills, where my father's hefty pair of seafaring binoculars revealed bobbing Dippers and hovering Common Kestrels. Today I still spend the majority of my time working and birding in the county.

Like most birders I keep a county list – as Paul James observed in in his Sussex article (*Birdwatch* 393: 30-34), it's a "lifelong record of all the bird species observed." I have no interest in the competitive aspect of listing and my personal list is far from the peak achieved by many older birders or those more obsessive about chasing every rarity. However, my list is intertwined with my life history and a glance through it is guaranteed to transport me back in time to familiar places, reincarnate the birders and conversations that pepper the new additions of years gone by, and track the path of my birding journey.

The Northumberland county list stands at 435 species as of the end of 2023. Three new additions are pending: Yelkouan Shearwater, Indian Golden Oriole and Green Warbler, although the tubenose's stay on the list may well be short-lived!

Determining who has seen how many of these species is a bit of a minefield, with some of the biggest listers maintaining an aura of secrecy akin to a medieval order protecting religious relics. There will be a few birders with lists around the 380-species mark given recent additions. My personal county list stands at 334 species and this continues to provide me with much motivation as I still have so many potential new species to add.

Early years

I look through my first couple of years of serious birding towards the end of the 1980s and several personal firsts stand out in my list. Back then we could still count on finding Golden Eagle with a trip out to the wild far western reaches of the county beyond Kielder Reservoir. Perhaps the species might be back in the Northumberland in the not-too-distant future if English reintroduction plans go ahead.

GARY WOODBURN

It would be neglectful of me to write about Northumberland without mentioning the Farne Islands. They hold a special place in the hearts of many birders and have been responsible for many new birds finding their way onto the county list, in particular tern species, including Caspian Tern (1880), Aleutian Tern (1979) and Sooty Tern (1966). I've paid many visits to the Farnes during the last 40 years, including two successful trips to see rare terns, catching up with 'Elsie' the Lesser Crested Tern (first recorded in 1984 and then returned annually until 1997) in 1989 and Bridled Tern in 2013.

Rare buntings offered several opportunities to add to my list in my first two or three years of regular birding, including a Rustic Bunting in Druridge Bay in 1988 and a Pine Bunting at Big Waters NR in 1990. Sandwiched between those two was my first self-found BB rarity (as it was then) – a Little Bunting on what was to become my patch at Newbiggin in 1989. This find will always be a personal favourite, not least because minutes later I met a birder from whom I learned so much over the years and shared so many great birds and birding experiences – the late Jimmy Steele MBE.

Northumberland is probably the best English county in which to see Little Auk. After strong northerly gales in late autumn, large numbers can be pushed close to the coast.

ALAN CURRY

Northumberland has hosted many famous rarities down the years. In June 2021, this fetching Red-necked Stint on the Blyth Estuary became the first twitchable bird in Britain for two decades.

PIERRE-MARIE EPINEY

Black Grouse can still be found in Northumberland, though the species has undergone a marked long-term decline and is now only readily found in the county's uplands.

Corn Bunting was readily available at that time. By contrast, today it is a species that would generate a great deal of county footfall from birders if a twitchable bird was found and accessible.

Happy memories

Other favourite memories from that period include a Broad-billed Sandpiper at the recently acquired Budge Fields at Druridge Pools – I was one of many observers led over the fields to view a pool at the back of the reserve from a grassy knoll by ranger Ian Douglas. A Terek Sandpiper lingered at the Blyth Estuary over the winter of 1989-1990; I later chanced upon it in May 1990, wandering with Common Redshanks at another of my local patches, Castle Island NR, just before it departed for good. New Year's Day 1992 found me back at Druridge Pools, this time for a Pied-billed Grebe – a long-staying individual that remained until April 1994 and is still the only county record.

Another of our now-missing species was Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. It took me until 1999 to catch up with this elusive bird in the county, when a breeding pair was discovered in Letah Wood near Hexham. Anyone who didn't make the most of that opportunity might find it a difficult species to encounter in Northumberland again. The same year produced another rare bunting, this time Britain's second Black-faced Bunting, which was another Jimmy Steele discovery in the hedge at Woodhorn, near Newbiggin – a site for rarities that he pioneered.

A couple of years later Woodhorn again offered the opportunity of a new county bird, this time a Hooded Merganser on the flashes. Later that spring a European Honey Buzzard lifted from the nearby ash lagoons, having presumably dropped in and roosted the previous night.

By 2005 I had a small business in Alnmouth, a place that always looked like it should produce rarities but seemingly never lived up to the promise. Perhaps it just never received the attention it deserved. Sat in the car one Saturday lunch break during September, I was listening to a Newcastle game on the radio while enjoying an arrival of Pied Wagtails and I was well chuffed to find a first-winter Citrine Wagtail among them.

Ticking on

Autumn 2010 produced a flurry of new additions to my county list, including Sykes's and Greenish Warblers, Red-flanked Bluetail and Squacco Heron. Spending increasing amounts of time at Newbiggin during this period brought dividends, including a Desert Wheatear bouncing around at Beacon Point in the winter of 2011 and my first Northumberland Yellow-legged Gull – a fine juvenile on the beach.

CAROLINE LEGG

While historically widespread in Northumberland, Corn Bunting is now rare in the county and the presence of a bird today would attract a reasonable crowd.

Red-rumped Swallow can be a difficult species to catch up with up in the county as they invariably move through quickly, so two lingering at Lynemouth in May 2012, found by local birder Iain Robson, were very welcome. That year also brought several new wader species to my list. Kentish Plover and White-rumped Sandpiper were seen on consecutive days on Holy Island, while a stonking Stilt Sandpiper was found by Gary Woodburn, another birder with whom I've shared some fine moments, including finding a Bluethroat on his patch while he was on holiday – an act which nearly ended our friendship! A Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Cheswick, discovered by Ross Ahmed, brought to an end a fine run of new wader species in September that year.

October 2012 saw Andy McLevy and I make a late evening dash across to Holy Island to catch up with a Pied Wheatear as the light faded. I'm not sure I could yomp across the dunes in the same fashion these days. It wouldn't be the last time I would cross that causeway with some urgency or trying to beat the setting sun. Four years later I was in Durham when news broke of a White's Thrush sat at the end of the Straight Lonnen. It was still there when I emerged from a meeting that seemed to drag on forever, so I set off north expecting news of its departure to come at any moment. In the event I arrived to find a huddle of hushed locals sat around the willows, looking like they were engaged in a séance, with the big thrush still sat bang in the middle barely a foot off the ground.

Perhaps my favourite new county birds have been the ones I've found and others have been able to enjoy. These include Eastern Bonelli's Warbler in 2014 and Siberian Accentor in 2016, which were both on my Newbiggin patch, making those particular county ticks all the sweeter.

Close friends finding good birds in the county is always a double pleasure. I've been privileged to bird with some great birders locally over the years and they've added many new species to my

NEIL HINCHLIFF

MICHAEL D BECKWITH

Holy Island is one of Northumberland's most famous rarity hot-spots. Many megas have been found there down the years, including what may become Britain's first-ever Indian Golden Oriole (inset) in spring 2024.

ANDREW CURTIS

The Cheviot Hills, a range of rolling uplands on the border of Northumberland and Scotland, is a haven for upland and moorland species. The mosaic of heather moorland, peat bog and acid grassland provides a rich habitat for a variety of birds, from raptors to ground-nesting waders.

county list through great finds such as Andy McLevy's Bufflehead in 2021 and Gary Woodburn's male Collared Flycatcher in 2013, which was a dream bird by the tin church at Low Newton. More recently, the nearby Grey-headed Lapwing was another of Woodburn's wacky waders and perhaps the most rewarding on a scrape that he had been integral in creating.

Working for BirdGuides has allowed me to be involved with one or two special birds, including the Black-winged Pratincole at Hauxley NR in 2014, where I finished my news shift from the hide on a phone while helping to confirm the identification alongside David Dack. Perhaps the most satisfying experience was being able to leverage my position at BirdGuides to organise the twitch for the Northern Mockingbird in May 2021. It was a county tick for all who saw it at Newbiggin, but only after some determined negotiation with the owner of the storage yard close to the garden it was frequenting.

Those that got away

I tend not to dwell on the county birds that got away. Sometimes, as in the case of Red-necked Stint, the chance comes around again – I missed the bird in 1995 but caught up with one at Blyth in 2021 that was found by Tyneside heavyweight Alan Curry, in the place where I grew up and where my grandfather worked for many years. Other notable omissions include the Slender-billed Curlew in 1998 and the recent Indian Golden Oriole on Holy Island.

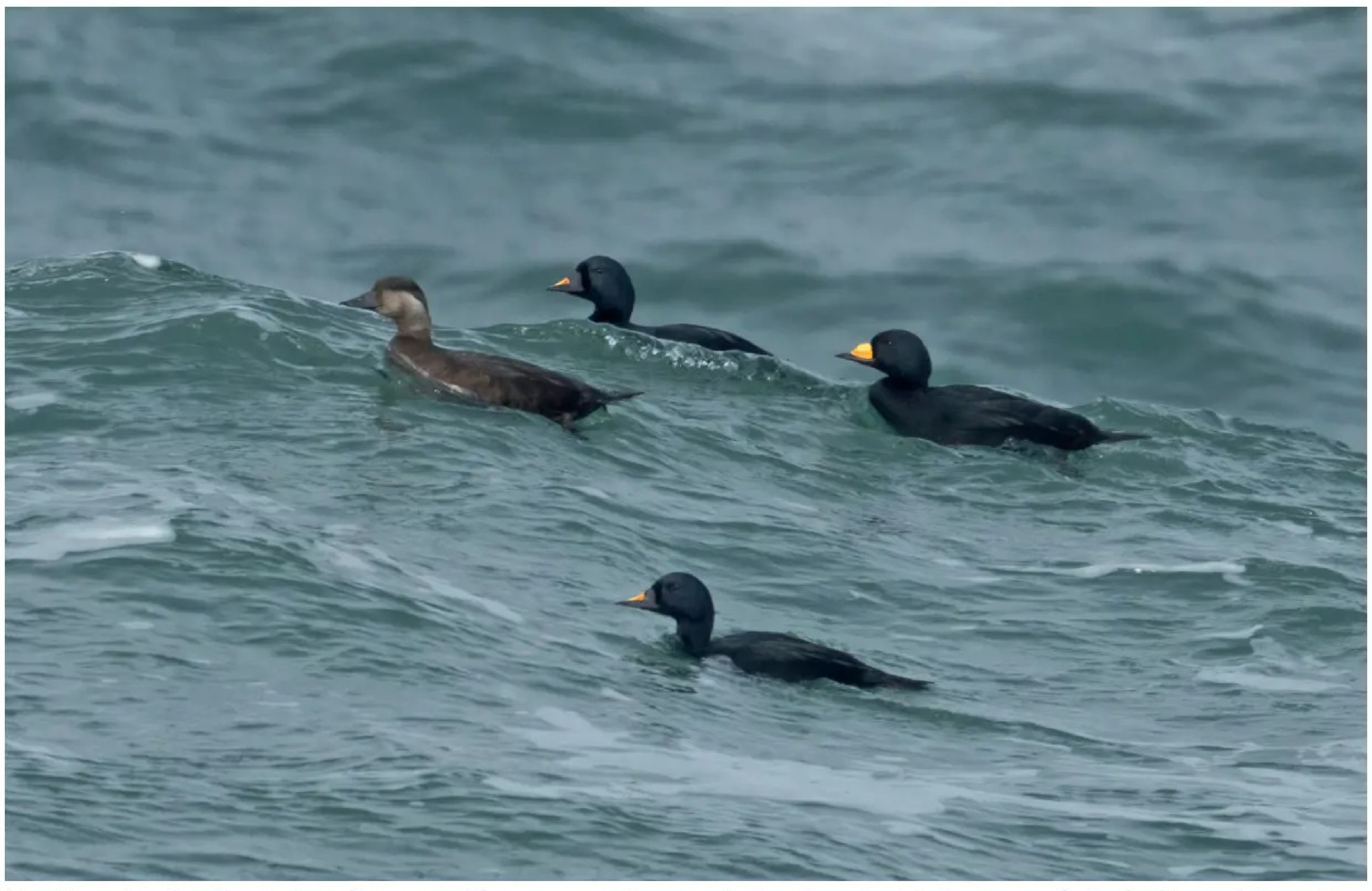
I file these away with other species that might one day put in another freak appearance before my time birding the county is up. These include Upland Sandpiper, that was last seen in 1879, and Pine Grosbeak, which has not been encountered since 1975. Perhaps Chough is more likely to turn up given the recent Kent reintroduction and the positive population trend elsewhere; the last county record concerned an individual on the Farnes in 1976.

Given the onward lurch of climate change a modern-day Great Spotted Cuckoo might not be out of the question – the last Northumberland record occurred in 1842, just five years into the reign of Queen Victoria. I'd also appreciate a repeat of the 1971 Sociable Lapwing, which is another species that might conceivably put in a reappearance.

Future finds

I'm always hopeful when I set out birding. New birds may be less frequent as the list grows, but they feel all the sweeter when they do occur. Such moments are always worth savouring. I'd love to pick up a Steller's Eider passing Newbiggin Point and watch it tracked up the coast in real time, imagining the reactions of both those that catch up with it and those no longer with us such as Jimmy Steele and Tim Cleeves, who would have reacted with so many expletives. Unlike many birders I enjoy watching gulls, so a juvenile American Herring Gull would be a great species to nail in Northumberland. Both White-throated Robin and Siberian Thrush would be new for Northumberland and the discovery of either on an autumn morning in the county (preferably at Newbiggin) would give me a huge sense of satisfaction.

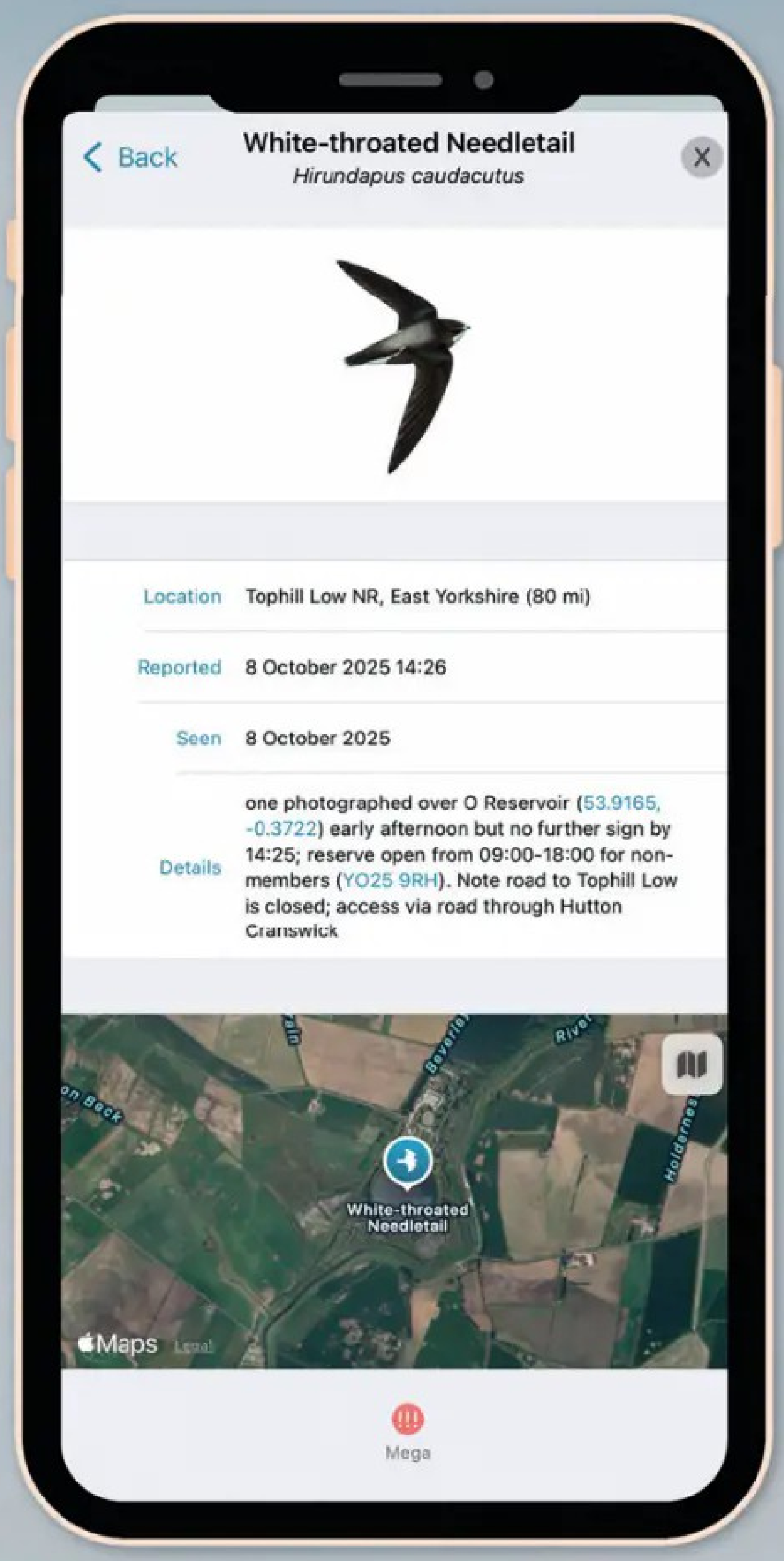
We should all be striving to find ways to lower our impacts on birds and other wildlife. Staying local and aiming to get the best out of where we live and work is one way of achieving this, giving all the more reason to forget the far-flung islands and concentrate on the county. ■



GRAHAM JEPSON

Northumberland's extensive coastline supports a variety of waterbirds, especially in the winter. A returning Black Scoter (right bird) has been present with Common Scoter in recent years.

NEVER MISS A RARITY AGAIN!



White-throated Needletail
Hirundapus caudacutus

Location Tophill Low NR, East Yorkshire (80 mi)
Reported 8 October 2025 14:26
Seen 8 October 2025
Details one photographed over O Reservoir (53.9165, -0.3722) early afternoon but no further sign by 14:25; reserve open from 09:00-18:00 for non-members (YO25 9RH). Note road to Tophill Low is closed; access via road through Hutton Cranswick

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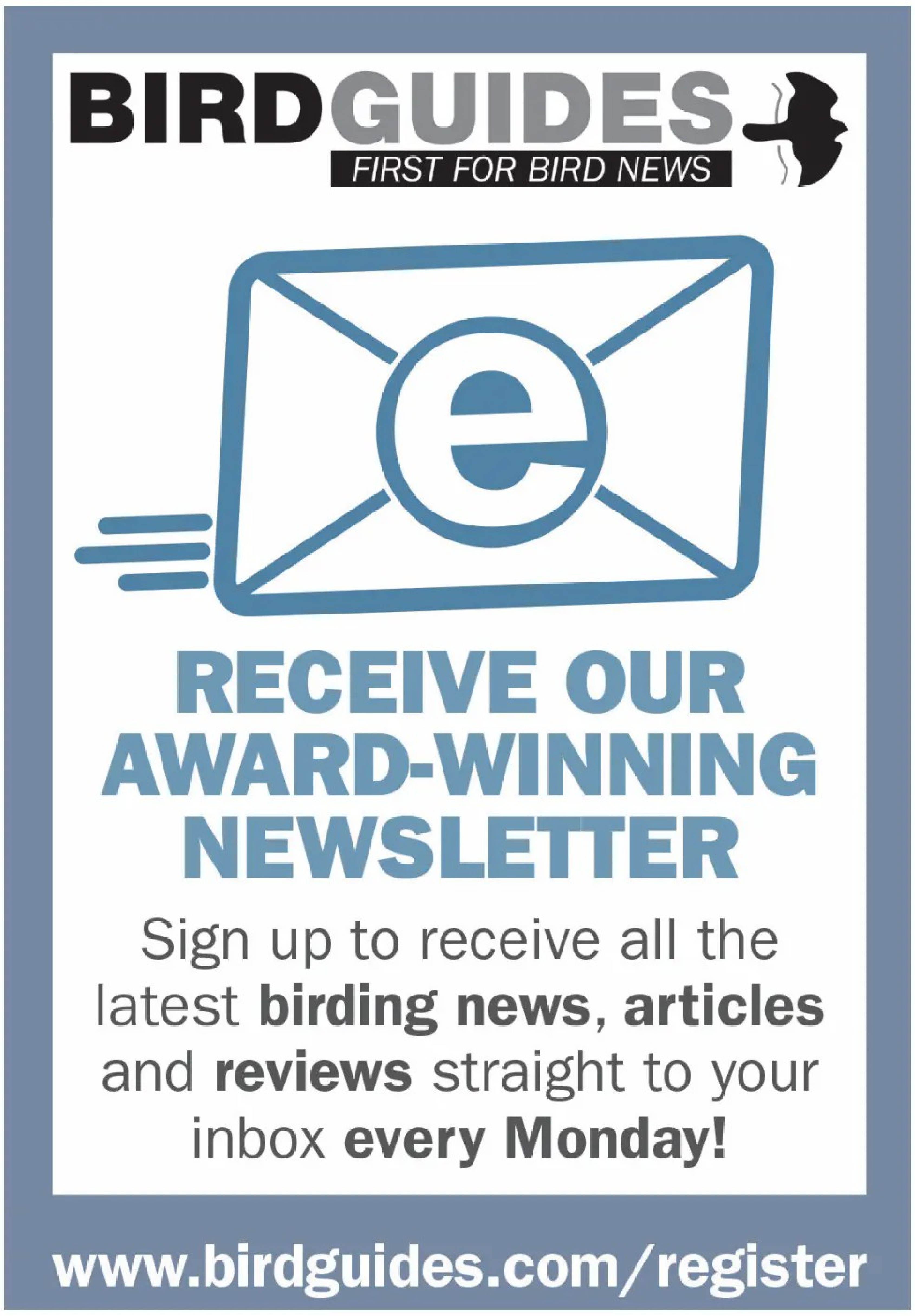

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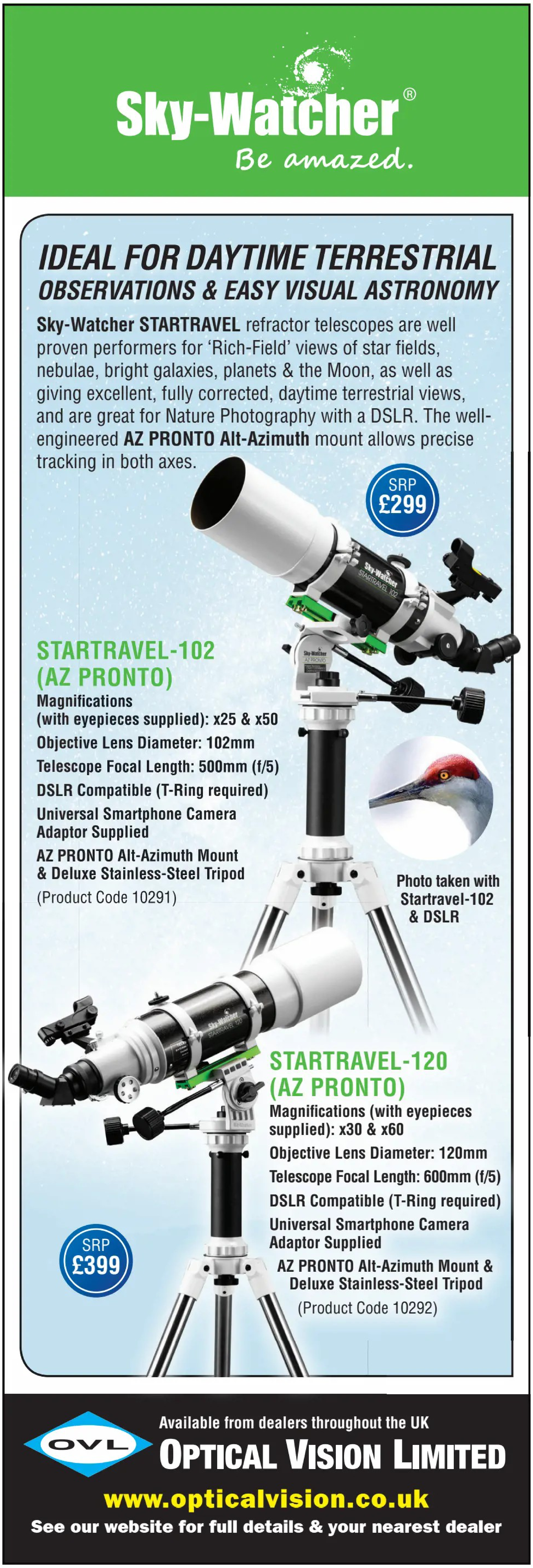
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Tree gull takes off

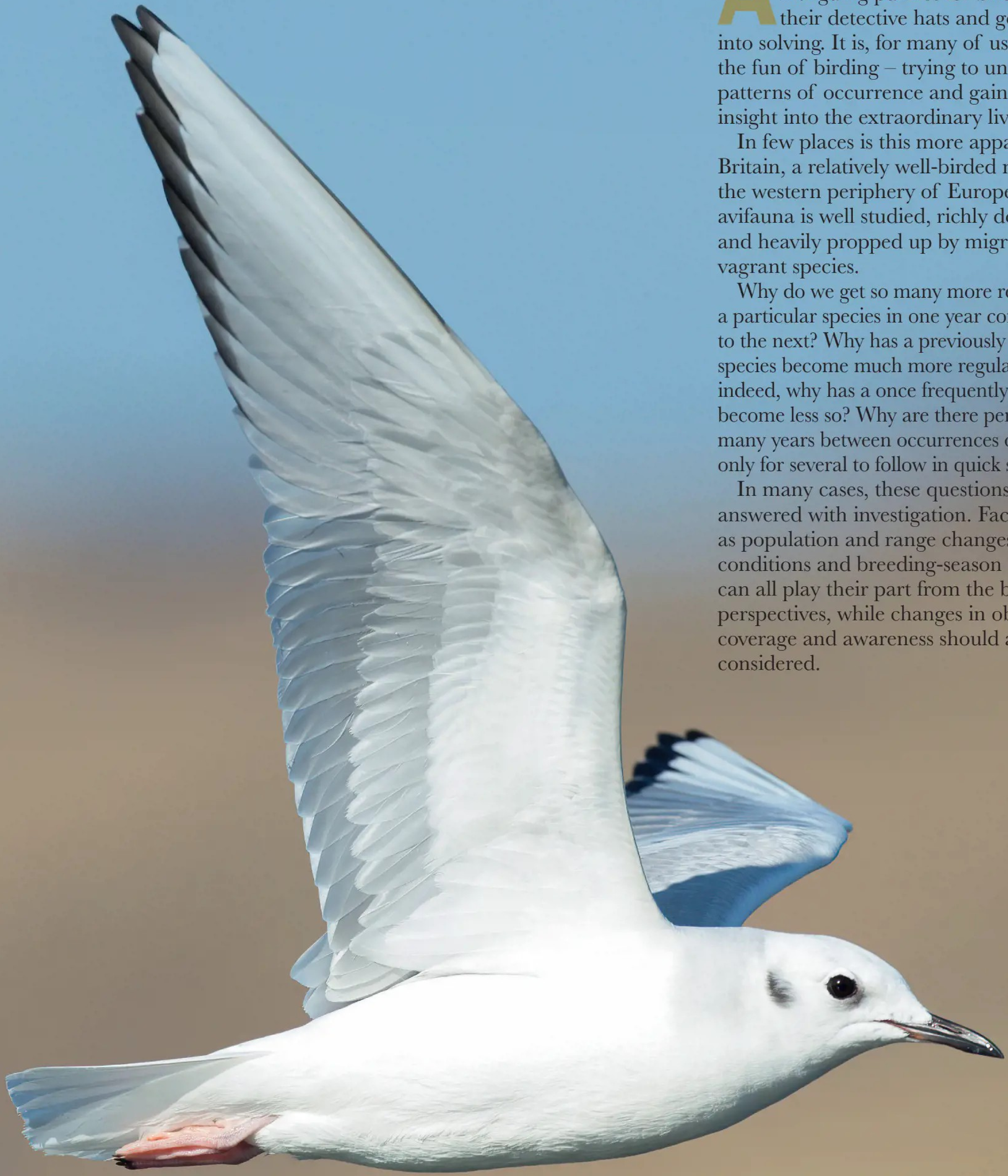
Recent years have seen a rise in the number of Bonaparte's Gull records in Britain and Europe. Why might that be? ***Josh Jones*** investigates.

Avian vagrancy constantly throws up intriguing puzzles for birders to don their detective hats and get stuck into solving. It is, for many of us, part of the fun of birding – trying to understand patterns of occurrence and gain a better insight into the extraordinary lives of birds.

In few places is this more apparent than Britain, a relatively well-birded nation on the western periphery of Europe whose avifauna is well studied, richly documented and heavily propped up by migrant and vagrant species.

Why do we get so many more records of a particular species in one year compared to the next? Why has a previously ultra-rare species become much more regular? Or indeed, why has a once frequently seen bird become less so? Why are there periods of many years between occurrences of a species, only for several to follow in quick succession?

In many cases, these questions can be answered with investigation. Factors such as population and range changes, weather conditions and breeding-season successes can all play their part from the birds' perspectives, while changes in observer coverage and awareness should also be considered.



IAN BUTLER

An adult Bonaparte's Gull in Glamorgan in February 2013, showing the species' characteristic dark bill, pale pink legs and clean white underwing.

Rising star

One species that is witnessing an uptick in British appearances is Bonaparte's Gull. This elegant larid is the Nearctic counterpart of 'our' common and ubiquitous Black-headed Gull although it is slightly smaller and daintier, thus in many respects appearing more of a halfway house between that species and Little Gull.

Bonaparte's Gull breeds in the remote taiga and boreal forests of Alaska and Canada, wintering widely across North America south to Mexico and Cuba. Official statistics give an estimated world population of 85,000-175,000 pairs, which is said to be increasing, and results in a conservation status of Least Concern.

In Britain, Bonaparte's Gull has long been considered a national rarity – all records are still assessed by the BBRC. However, the recently published 'Report on rare birds in Great Britain in 2024' describes Bonaparte's Gull as "teetering on the brink of BBRC rarity status" and lists no fewer than 13 records for that year. For a bird to be dropped from the BBRC's list of considered species, it must average 10 records per year for 10 years. In seven of the 10 years to 2024, this key threshold was either met or exceeded. The trend has continued into 2025, with at least 15 new birds tallied by the end of October including a British-record count of four (two adults and two first-winters) together in Caithness in mid-October.

Closer examination of annual data back to 1995 shows only one blank year (in 2002) for new arrivals and a consistently strong showing in every year since 2011. Furthermore, among the annual totals are a healthy number of first-winter birds, hinting at good breeding success in the native range which creates a larger pool of individuals for potential vagrancy.

JESS FINDLAY (BIA)

Bonaparte's is unusual among gulls in that it almost always nests in conifer trees, usually building the nest up to 7 m above ground. Forested islands within lakes or ponds are especially favoured.

European surge

Bonaparte's Gull is a rare but regular vagrant to Europe, although the great majority of records come from the western extremities of the continent, especially Atlantic-facing coasts, with very few occurrences noted further east. For example, there had been only seven records of Bonaparte's Gull in the Netherlands up to the end of 2023. Thus, this analysis focuses on the 'Atlantic' countries, where there are enough records to establish trends.

Reflecting the uptick in Britain, Bonaparte's Gull records have risen noticeably in Ireland in recent years. The period between 1995 and 2004 produced a mean of 5.6 new birds per year, with this average increasing to 8.7 per year between 2005 and 2014 and 10 per year between 2015 and 2024.

The upward trend has also been observed in Iceland, where the first nesting attempt for the Western Palearctic took place in 2017. A pair of adult Bonaparte's was discovered in a Black-headed Gull colony in early June, with a nest with three eggs found later that month. However, the eggs did not hatch and the attempt failed. With no trees in that part of the country, the birds unusually took to nesting on the ground.

Interestingly, a bird that has summered in Iceland in recent years has been proven to winter in France, where Bonaparte's Gull records have gradually increased since the turn of the century. According to French birders, this trend may only correspond to a wider uptake in birding in the country rather than reflect a genuine uptick in appearances.

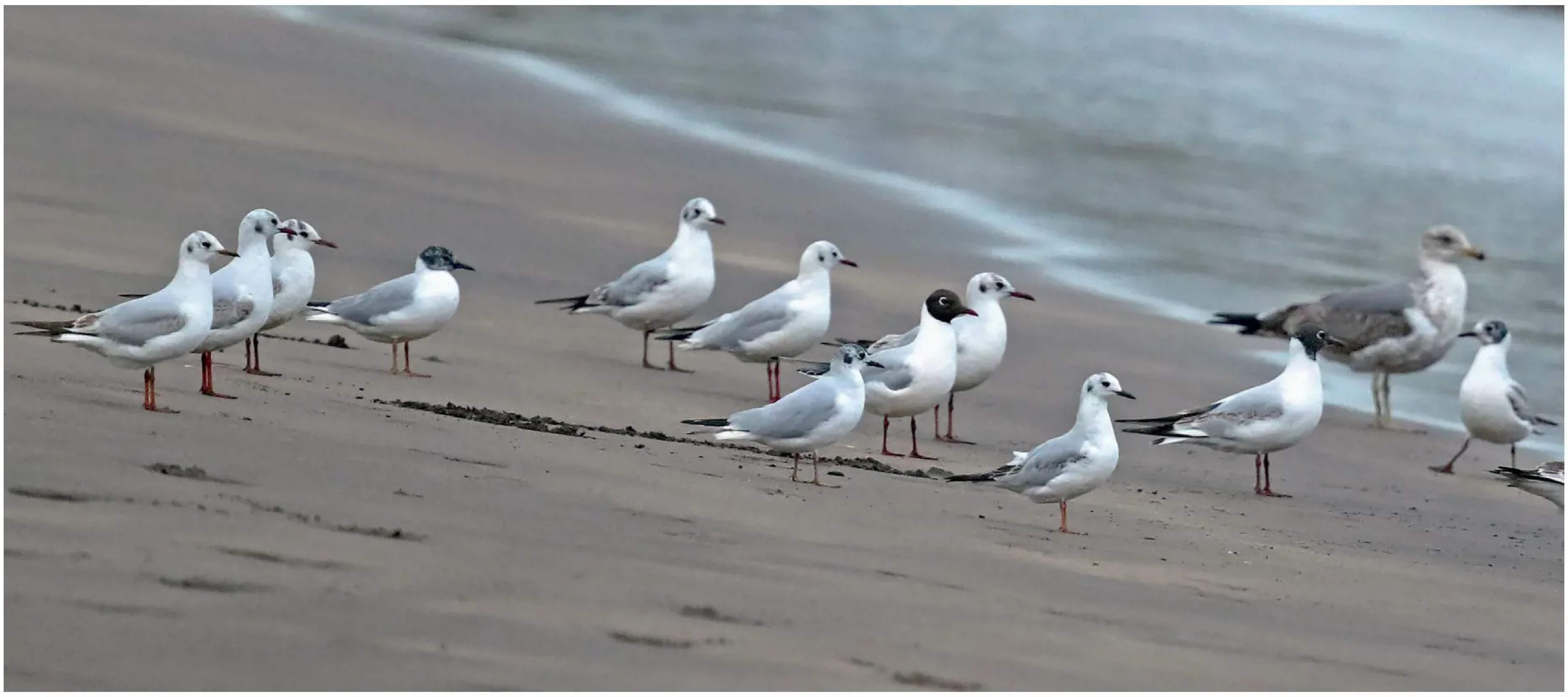
Sightings of Bonaparte's Gull are becoming more frequent in Spain, with an accelerating trend over the past decade closely reflecting the situation in Britain and Ireland. The species is now on the cusp of being removed from the list of Spanish rarities, with an increasing number of new birds annually in addition to several regularly returning individuals. In March 2025, a new national record count of three birds was made together at Lago, Galicia.

The past 10 years has also seen an increase in records from neighbouring Portugal, where several regularly returning wintering birds are bolstered by new arrivals annually, including regular young birds. An influx in 2019 saw no fewer than four different birds recorded.

A clear trend is not apparent for the Azores, where the species is seen annually – including three birds together on Terceira in April 2025. A lack of regular coverage of gull roosts may well mean that the species is under-recorded in the archipelago.

ANDREW JORDAN

It is noticeable that a relatively high proportion of vagrant Bonaparte's Gulls seen in Europe are young birds. This is in stark contrast to Ring-billed Gull, records of which have fallen away on this side of the Atlantic in recent times in line with a population decline within the native range.


SIMON BUCKELL

Three Bonaparte's Gulls (two adults and a first-winter) with Black-headed Gulls and a single Azores Gull on Terceira, Azores, in April 2025.

Back on home soil

The rise – and subsequent demise – of Ring-billed Gull as a regular visitor to Europe has been discussed previously (*Birdwatch* 329: 48-51). The recent marked decline of that species in Europe could be clearly linked to a rapid drop-off in the volume of first-winter birds appearing annually. Six years on from that article, there has been no recovery in its rate of occurrence on this side of the Atlantic. The decrease appears tied to a recent population decline in the native range, so that would be the most obvious place to start when it comes to analysing the fortunes of Bonaparte's Gull. How is it faring in North America?

The answer to that is far from straightforward, but appears to be 'reasonably well'. Drawing firm conclusions is not easy, as the bird's favoured arboreal breeding grounds are either scantily surveyed or not checked at all due to their remoteness.

As such, relatively little is known about Bonaparte's Gull during the breeding season. Curiously, the species usually nests in conifer trees either as lone pairs or in small colonies, which makes locating and monitoring nests a challenge. The female lays clutches of up to three eggs. Once the chicks hatch, they soon leave the safety of the nest and are led to nearby ponds, bogs or fiords, where they are reared to fledging.

In the limited data that is available, there appears to have been a slight decrease in the core breeding range of Bonaparte's Gull, with slight increases noted at the eastern and western peripheries. In other words, while the long-term trend is at least stable, there has not been the clear population boom over the past couple of decades which would go some way to explaining the current accelerating trend in Europe. The situation is clearly more nuanced than this – but reported increases in the breeding populations closest to Europe could nonetheless prove significant.

Shifts and trends

In order to draw better conclusions, we need to get more granular with the (admittedly scant) North American data. An increase has been reported from the east of the breeding range, but are there any other clues as to why European records are on the up? Are the birds' migration routes and wintering ranges shifting?

With such a poorly studied breeding population, emphasis is placed on wintering-range counts for assessing the species. The upper limit of the estimated world population is suspected to be conservative on the basis of huge non-breeding gatherings in the likes of San Francisco Bay and the Niagara Frontier. In the latter region, numbers have increased massively over the past century, but what are more recent trends like?

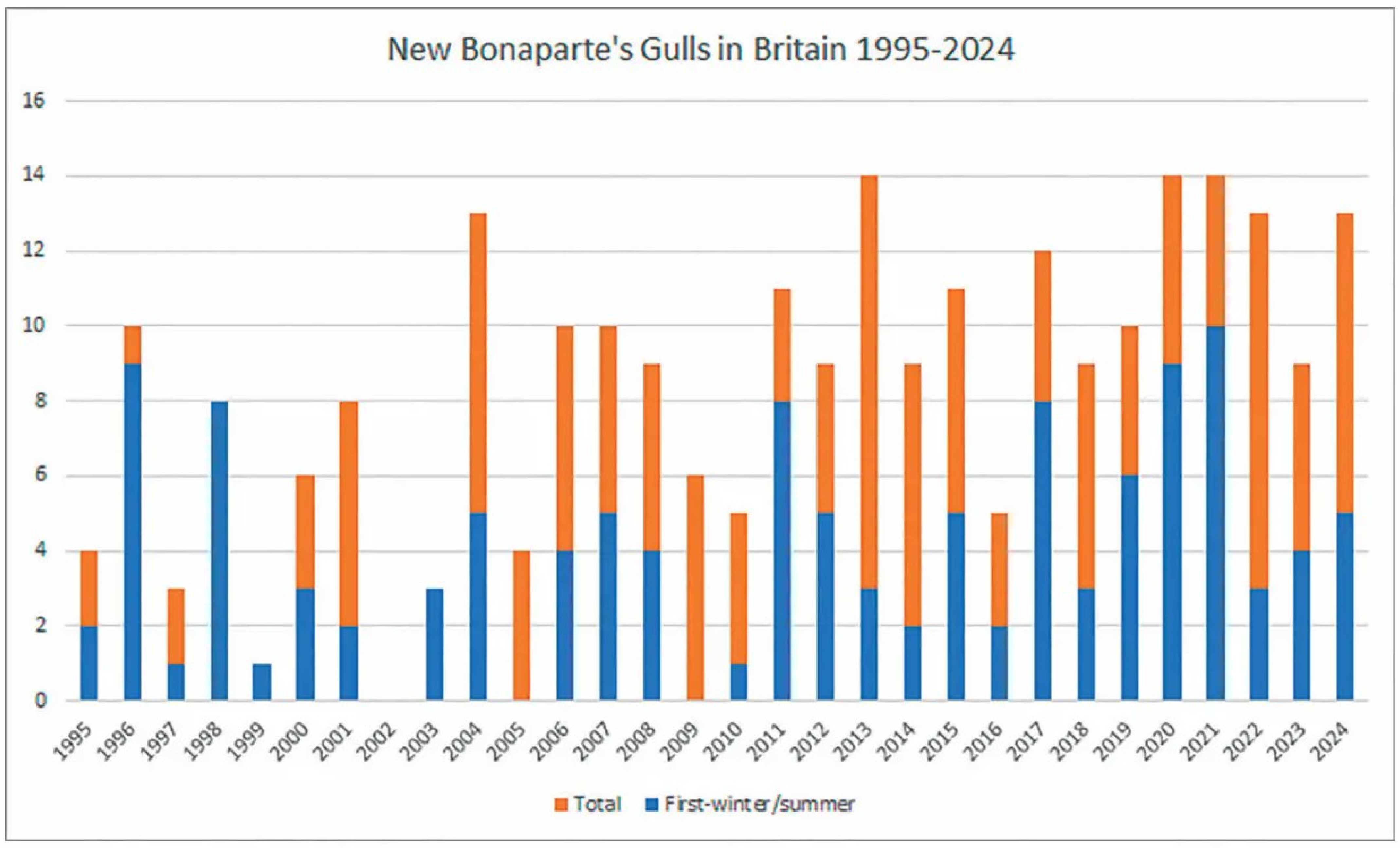
What is clear is that Bonaparte's is a versatile species and numbers fluctuate greatly from year to year across the non-breeding range, presumably in response to local feeding conditions, weather and other factors. However, finding reliable and up-to-date trends and data is difficult. Birds of the World references studies that are now decades old and therefore of little relevance to the contemporary conundrum that we are investigating.

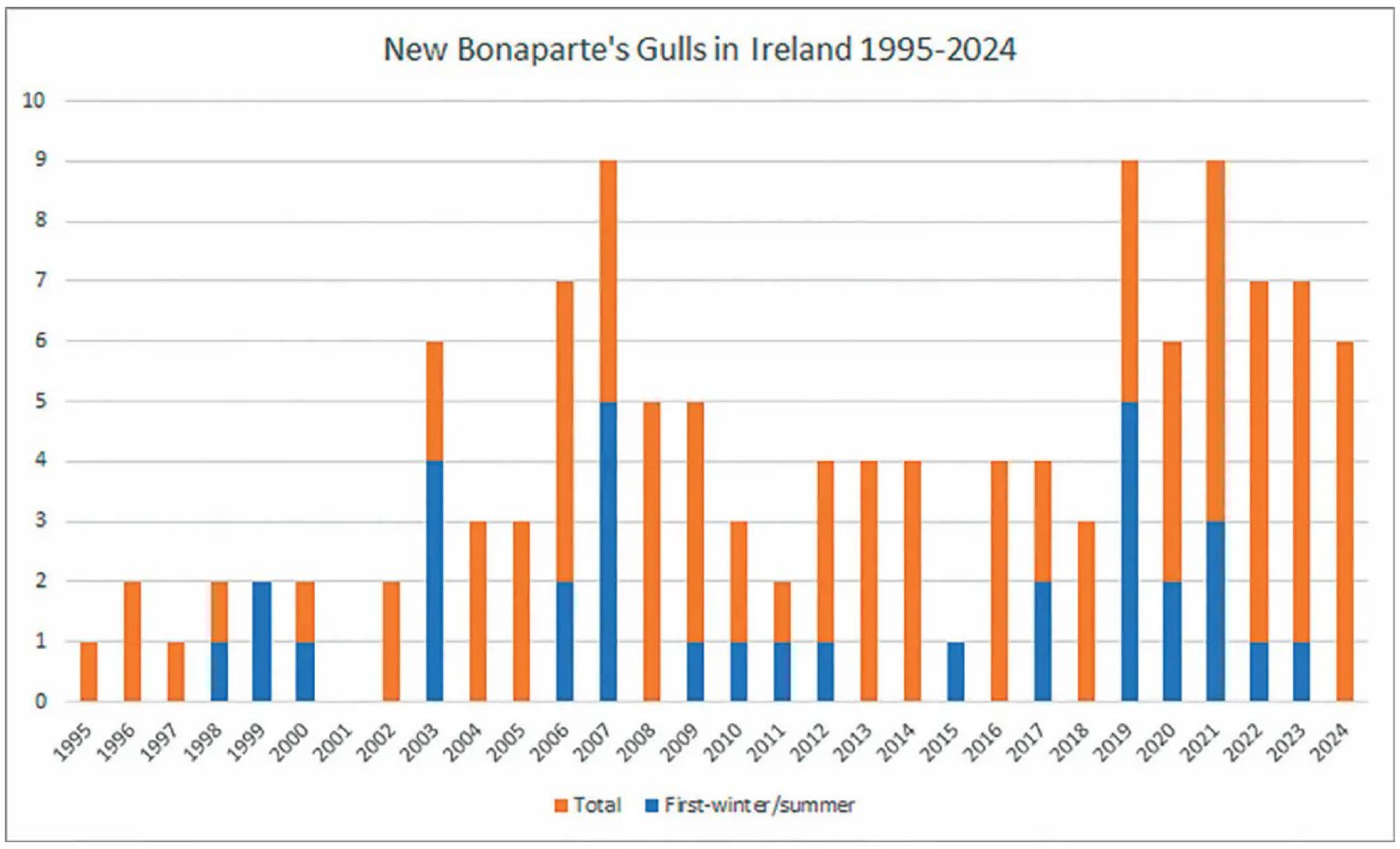
The Status and Trends feature from eBird suggests a 27% decline in abundance across North America between 2011 and 2021, which is entirely at odds with an observed increase in Europe over a similar period. Given the relatively recent widespread uptake of eBird, these trends are arguably to be treated with a pinch of salt.

Having spoken to birders up and down the Eastern Seaboard, the general message seems to be that, if anything, Bonaparte's Gull is showing a downward trend in many areas. For example, numbers at spring staging sites in New

WENDY MILLER

Outside the breeding season, Bonaparte's Gull will congregate in groups many thousands strong. The Niagara Frontier in New York State is one such hot-spot where huge flocks often gather.





Records of new Bonaparte's Gulls in Britain (top) and Ireland between 1995 and 2024. As well as a long-term upward trend in sightings, both countries have had a series of prolific years since 2019.

England are reported to be much lower now than they were 30 years ago.

However, Christmas Bird Counts highlight how numbers can vary greatly from year to year. For example, 16,857 individuals were counted in New York in 2013-14 but only 1,164 in 2021-22. To further illustrate that the situation is perhaps not clear-cut, records from Newfoundland are reported to be slightly up – although this was caveated with increased observer numbers and improved reporting.

Bonaparte's is more pelagic than other gulls and will often feed well offshore, as exemplified by eBird records of large flocks, sometimes hundreds strong, some 200 km or more off New England during the winter months. Such high numbers out in the Atlantic mean that the species will be susceptible to becoming caught up in the autumn and winter storms which deliver birds to Europe. Could it be that increasing numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls are becoming more pelagic during the non-breeding season, creating a higher potential for vagrancy?

Drawing conclusions

The situation is far from clear and one must consider if it might simply be a case of improved observer coverage in Europe that is causing the uptick in Bonaparte's Gull records. Yes, perhaps there is now increased scrutiny of carrier species (especially Black-headed Gulls), at least in nations such as France where observer effort has greatly improved in recent times. But there has long been a good base of quality observers in Western Europe searching for vagrant birds, and the accelerating trend of Bonaparte's occurrences doesn't reflect a sudden upturn in gull-watching in already well-birded countries such as Britain. That throws the focus back on there having been a genuine change in abundance, distribution or migration routes in the native range.

Ultimately, Bonaparte's Gull is not a species that lends itself easily to study. Its remote breeding grounds and erratic winter distribution, combined with an overall lack of high-quality and consistent monitoring across North America, makes analysis of its true status there difficult.

Ironically, then, the observed increase in Europe in recent years might offer one of the best clues as to how this species is faring in the native range. Generally speaking, vagrancy tends to increase in tandem with a burgeoning population or a range expansion. And while strong conclusions cannot necessarily be drawn in the case of Bonaparte's Gull, it nonetheless underlines why the study and documentation of rarities matters, for they can help us to identify trends that might be difficult to monitor in the native range for a variety of reasons.

It seems that we are left with more questions than answers. There appears to be a noticeable spring peak in Western European Bonaparte's Gull records, so is the source of these a small but growing winter population somewhere in Macaronesia or north-west Africa? Are Bonaparte's Gulls increasingly performing a loop migration that brings them through the north-east Atlantic? Is this species becoming more pelagic in the east of its range? Is the greater frequency of autumn and winter storms displacing more birds into European waters than previously?

There are few constants when it comes to avian vagrancy. In the case of Ring-billed Gull, the bubble eventually burst and the species has returned to a much rarer European status than it had only a few decades ago. While Bonaparte's Gull is currently experiencing a boom in Europe, how long might it last? Could the species go one further than Ring-billed Gull and establish a breeding toehold on this side of the Atlantic, or will there be a negative spiral in records? Time will tell, but one thing seems for sure – there has never been a better time to find this species on these shores. ■

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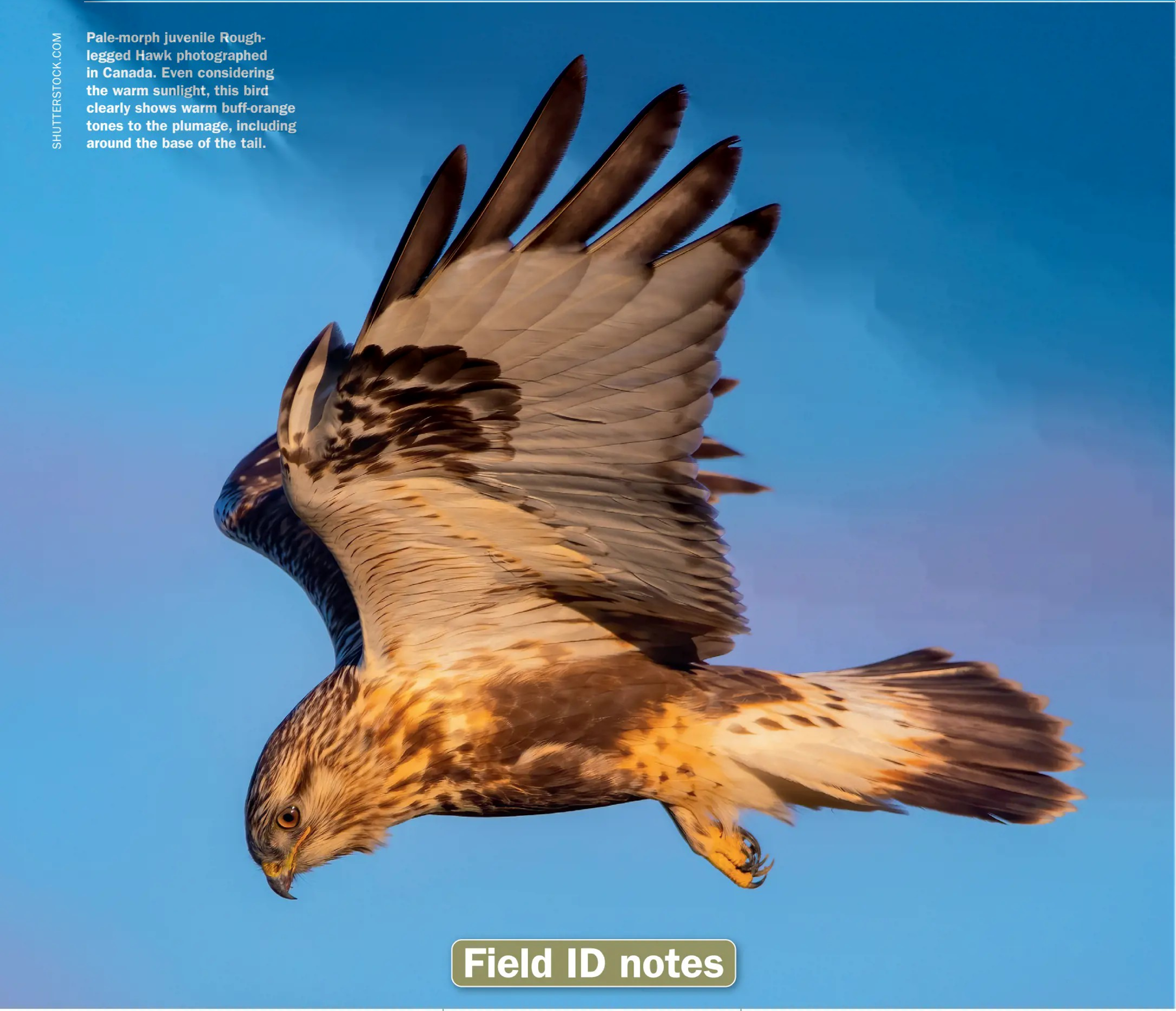


SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Pale-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk photographed in Canada. Even considering the warm sunlight, this bird clearly shows warm buff-orange tones to the plumage, including around the base of the tail.

Field ID notes

Rough-legged Hawk

Raptor enthusiast ***Jack Ashton-Booth*** looks in depth at how to separate juvenile Rough-legged Buzzards of Nearctic origin from the more familiar Palearctic birds.

KEY FEATURED TAXA

- **Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus*
  - *B l lagopus* (Northern Eurasia)
  - *B l sanctijohannis* (North America; ‘Rough-legged Hawk’)

Few sights stir the soul quite like a Rough-legged Buzzard appearing ‘in off’ against the North Sea surf. These Arctic wanderers, feathered to their toes, are built for harsh frozen tundra, not salt spray, so to observe this is to witness the magic and fragility of migration.

As someone who has spent years working with satellite-tagged Hen Harriers, I’ve developed a deep respect for long-distance raptor movements. Watching migration data unfold in real time makes the world feel both smaller and avian movements more astonishing.

Even so, transatlantic raptor migration still feels miraculous to me. Just occasionally the stars align for the perfect conditions for a box-fresh juvenile ‘Roughie’ – a Nearctic Rough-legged Hawk – to make landfall in Europe.

Unlike the more familiar juveniles we know as ‘Rough-legs’ – birds from Northern Europe that we see most winters in Britain – the North American subspecies is much more variable with an impressive array of plumages.

Dark morphs are rather distinctive, but pale-morph juveniles present a stiff identification challenge and are altogether more subtle, variable and utterly compelling. This article will give birders a simple toolkit to help recognise these rare winter visitors from across the Atlantic.

Although Rough-legged Hawk is not yet a subspecies officially recorded in Britain it is a potential vagrant, with likely candidates having previously appeared.

The Rough-legged clan

Across the Arctic, Rough-legged Buzzard forms a single, circumpolar species comprising four subspecies: *lagopus* of Northern Europe-Asia; *menzbieri* of North-East Asia; *kamtschatkensis* of Far Eastern Russia; and *sanctijohannis* of North America.

Crucially, and pertinent to this discussion, the three Palearctic subspecies occur only in a pale morph, whereas the Nearctic *sanctijohannis* is dimorphic, appearing in both dark and light forms. The latter is often very similar in appearance to Palearctic birds.

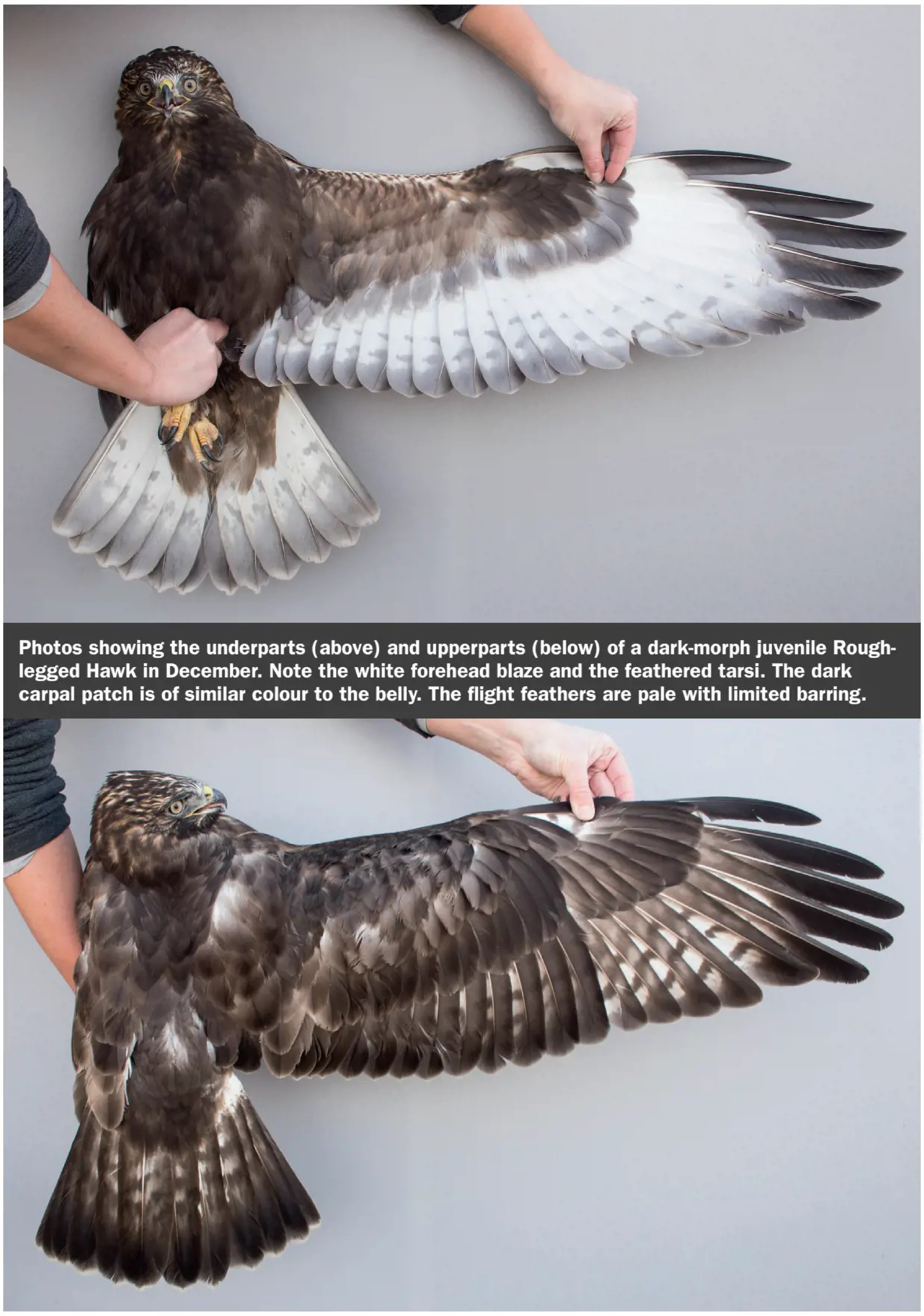
This is where the difficulty arises: a pale juvenile Rough-legged Hawk from eastern Canada can look almost identical to a juvenile European Rough-legged Buzzard – until examined closely.

The ID challenge

Dark morphs

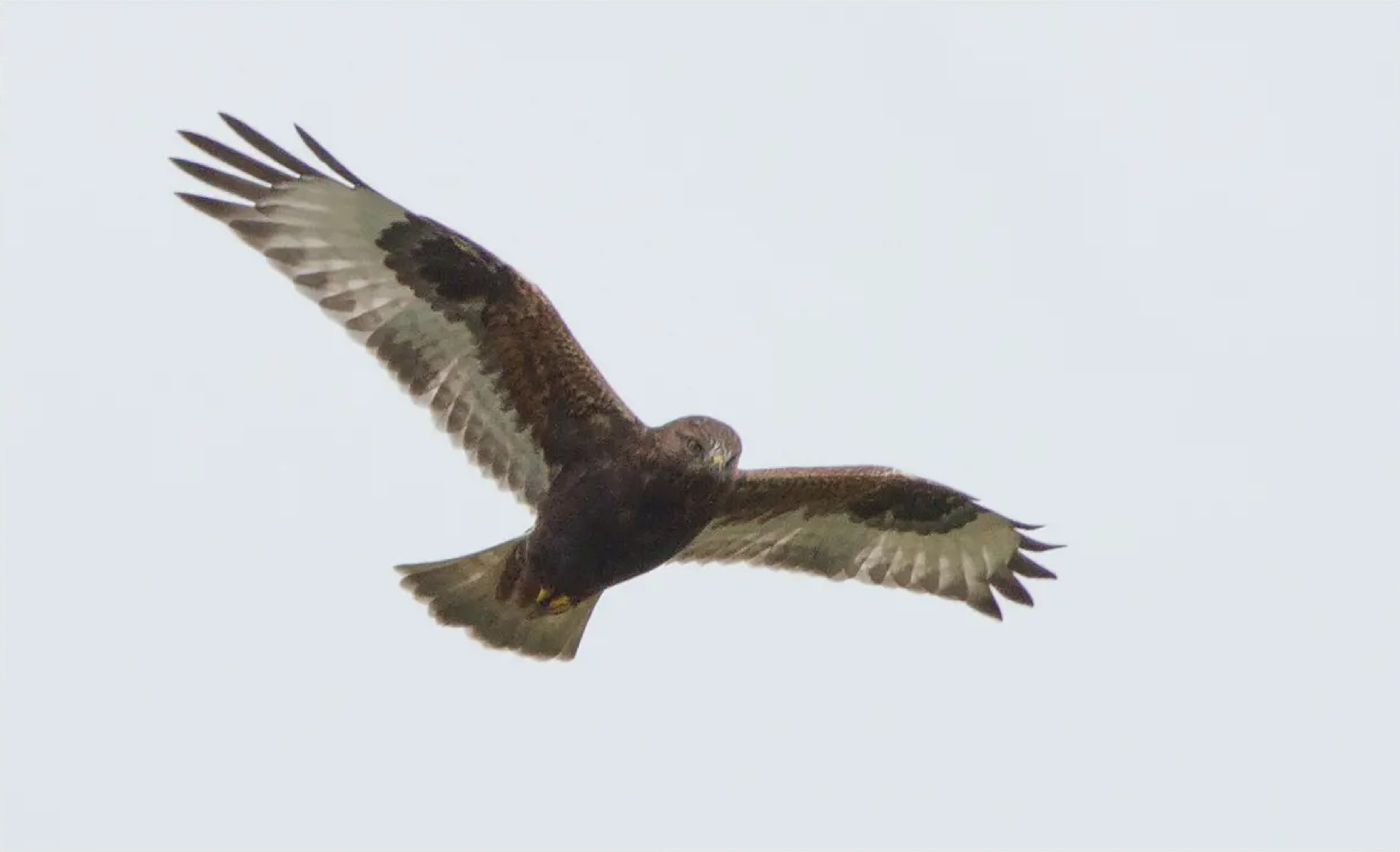
Firstly, let's look at dark-morph juvenile *sanctijohannis*. This form is more commonly encountered in the humid, moist areas of eastern Canada which, geographically speaking, is the most likely source of European vagrants. In a European context, the only realistic confusion species are dark morphs of Common and Steppe Buzzards.

Dark-morph *sanctijohannis* commonly appears as a rusty-brown bird that looks as though it has fallen into a coal store, with a relatively patchy dark, almost black-looking ventral side. The head, underwing coverts and vent are typically the most contrasting and rustiest areas.


NICOLE RICHARDSON

NICOLE RICHARDSON

Photos showing the underparts (above) and upperparts (below) of a dark-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk in December. Note the white forehead blaze and the feathered tarsi. The dark carpal patch is of similar colour to the belly. The flight feathers are pale with limited barring.


JOSH JONES

A dark-morph juvenile Rough-legged Hawk on Corvo, Azores, in October 2013. The carpals and belly are the darkest parts of the plumage, creating a 'ghosting' of the typical pattern of pale morphs. A white forehead blaze is apparent and the bird has rusty tones to the brown plumage.

It shows a bright white forehead blaze, yellow iris and dark feathered legs that contrast sharply with the yellow talons. The tone of the carpal patch matches that of the belly.

The flight feathers are pale towards the base with variable amounts of transverse barring; the terminal bar is the most prominent, though largely diffuse in this age group. Primaries p6-p10 are pale and essentially unbarred. The reduced demarcation in the tail band gives the impression of a shorter tail compared with pale-morph *sanctijohannis*.

Dark-morph Rough-legged Hawk is quite Common Buzzard-like in appearance but nevertheless hovers more routinely while hunting, using deeper wing-beats. The bill and skull are relatively small, giving a serpentine impression.

Common Buzzard regularly hovers

while hunting, especially in windy conditions. Plumage-wise, however, it is never as uniform in the contour feathering as *sanctijohannis*. Attention should be paid to the amount of transverse barring in the flight feathers. Common Buzzard shows comprehensive and distinct barring along the entire length of the flight feathers, rather than the weak and diffuse barring typical of dark-morph *sanctijohannis*. The carpal patch is less pronounced and more isolated, and the species usually displays a variable crescent across the breast.

The underwing coverts and axillaries are variably barred. The lower legs are yellow and not 'hare-footed' along their length. The species appears more compact overall, with shorter wings and tail. The terminal tail band is not a particularly prominent feature. The skull and bill are more angular and menacing, and p6-p8 ordinarily show a degree of barring.

Dark-morph juvenile Steppe Buzzard, the long-distance migratory *vulpinus* subspecies of Common Buzzard, may display a uniformly chocolate-toned plumage. The head appears 'cuter' in this form than in nominate Common Buzzard, albeit not as cute-looking as Rough-legged Hawk. Crucially, the lower legs are unfeathered and yellow. The carpal patch tends to be darker than the belly patch and there is no white forehead blaze. However, p6-p10 are pale and essentially unbarred.

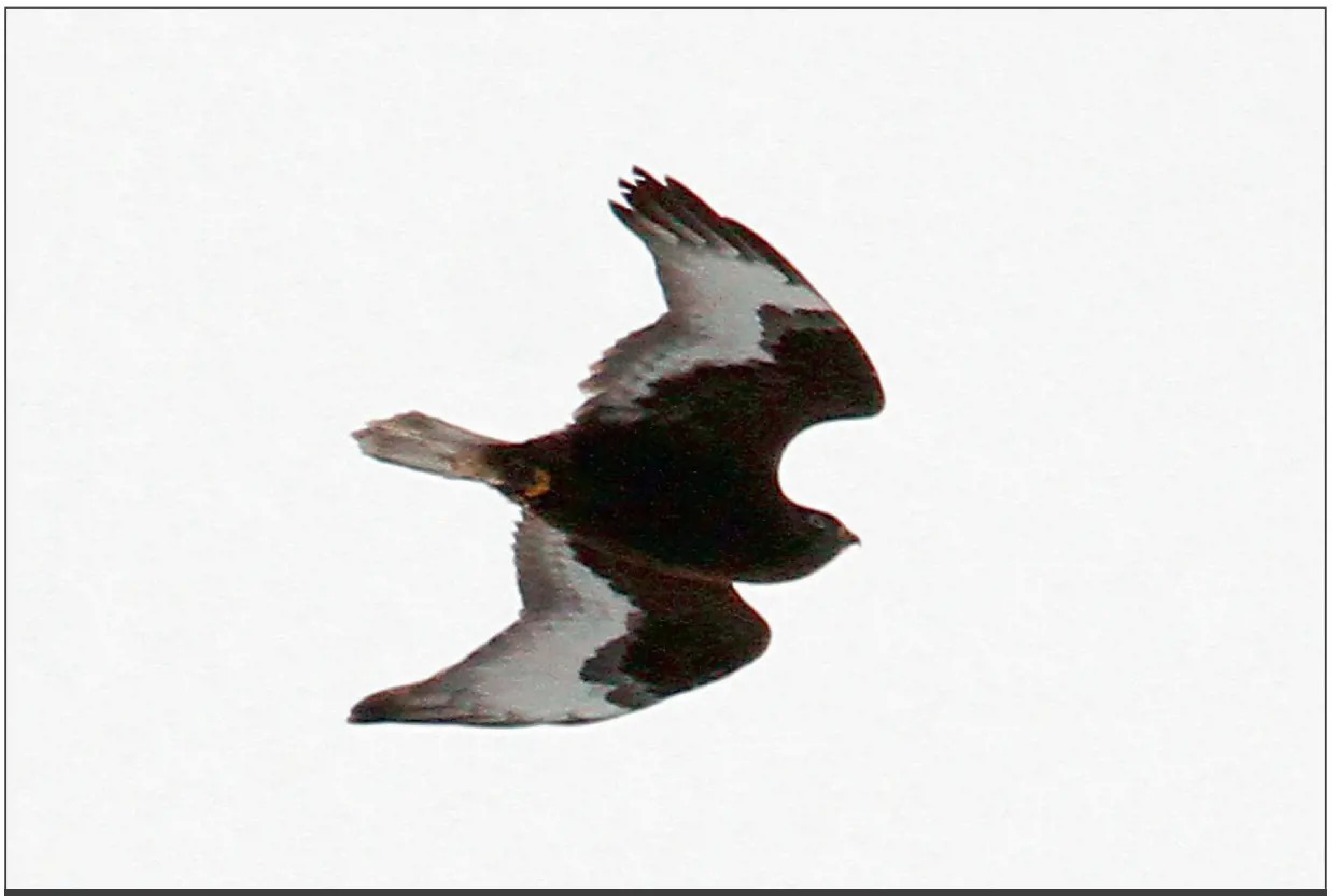
Pale morphs

Dark-morph *sanctijohannis* is easy enough to ID, but light morphs are another matter entirely. When assessing a candidate, close attention should be paid to the plumage tones.

Both the Nearctic and Palearctic juveniles share the same classic '*lagopus* phenotype': a relatively small head, long wings, long tail and the feathered tarsi that give the birds the 'hare-footed' scientific name. This said, pale-morph *sanctijohannis* often sport richer and warmer hues throughout their plumage, giving them a pronounced tortoiseshell colouration when compared with the colder, more washed-out greys and browns of their Eurasian cousins.

From years of studying specimens, photographs and live birds in eastern Canada I've come to the conclusion that rather than showing a single 'fixed' plumage, pale-morph juvenile *sanctijohannis* exist across a 'tortoiseshell spectrum' with a range of plumages. The more saturated the bird's plumage, the more assignable it is to a Nearctic origin. The degree of this 'cinnamon wash' often looks to reflect the extent of

JACK ASHTON-BOOTH



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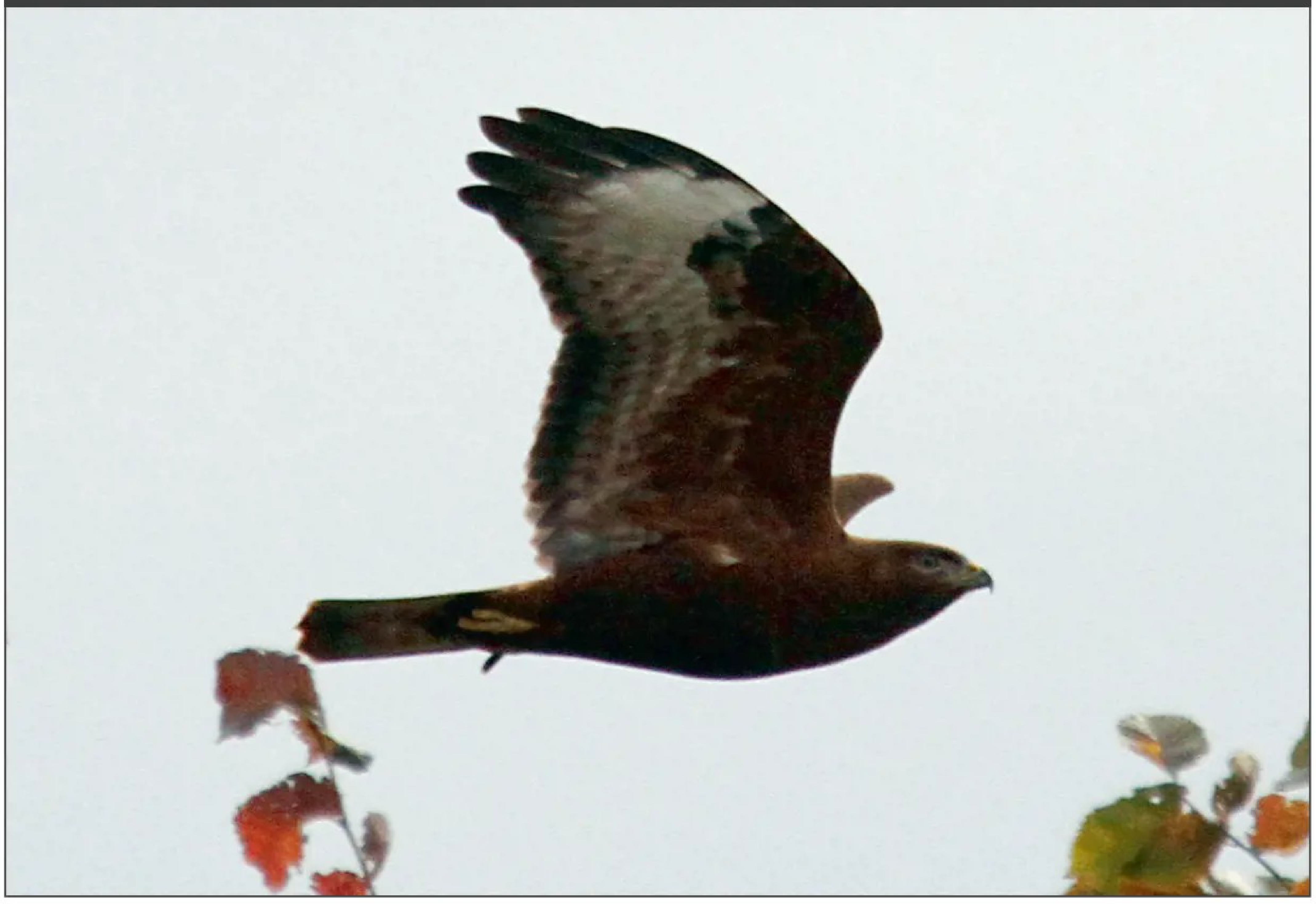
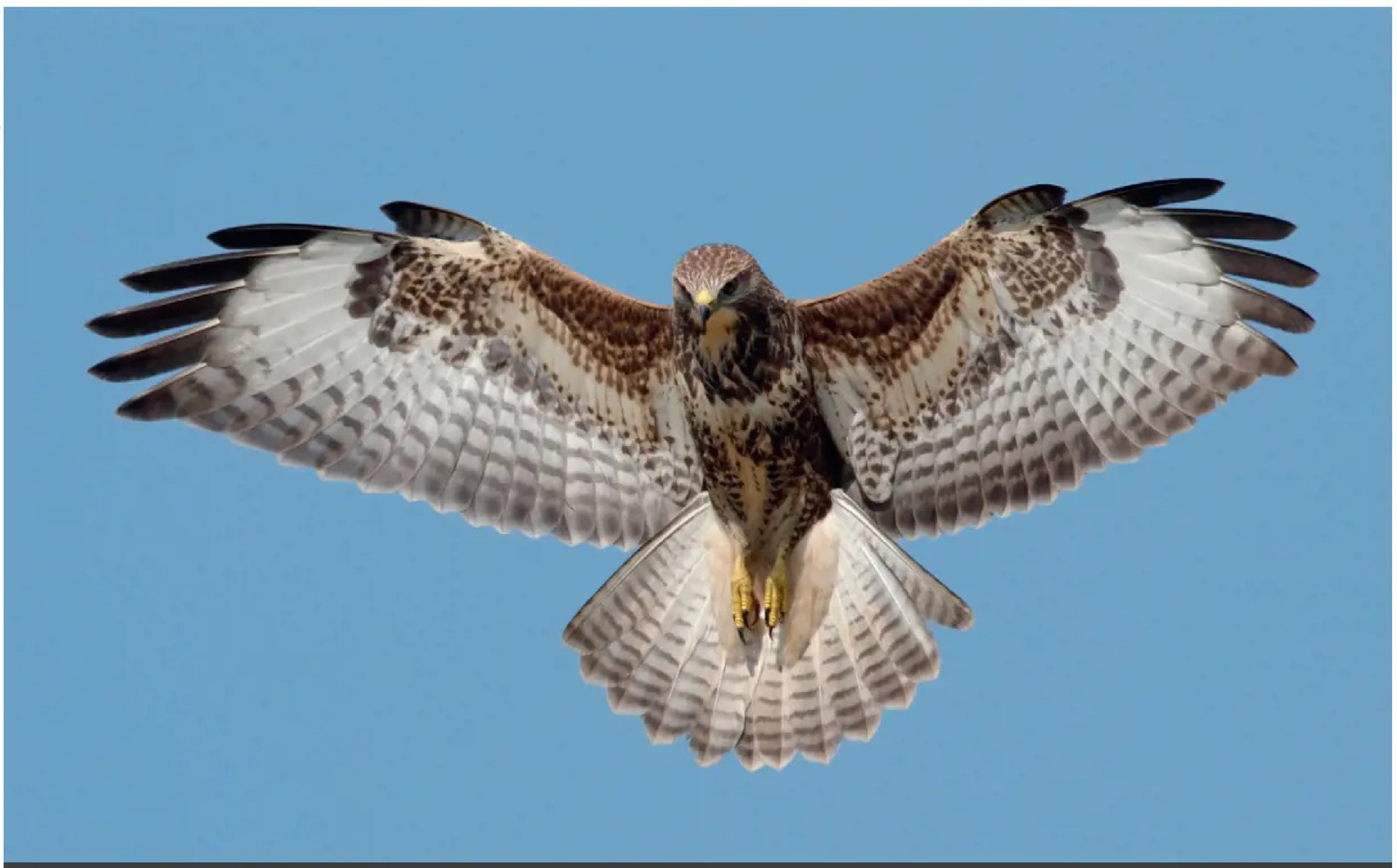


Comparison of a dark-morph Rough-legged Hawk from December (above) with a dark-morph Steppe Buzzard from September (below). The two forms are superficially very similar, but the latter is stronger-headed and has more prominent transverse barring on the flight feathers.

JAKOB SCHUT (AGAMI.NL)



Common Buzzard is extremely variable in appearance. Darker birds than this occur and may cause confusion, but key features include the prominent barring across the underside of the flight feathers, the compact structure and (usually) a paler crescent on the breast.

melanistic gene flow, which is probably an indicator of the humidity in the origin of the natal area.

I classify pale-morph *sanctijohannis* into three loose groups based on their expressed plumage. This tortoiseshell spectrum helps try and make sense of the huge variation encountered in the field. It's not a hard rule but a visual shorthand – a way of describing how cinnamon saturation and contrast increase along a gradient. The groups are:

Calico: a light light morph, with limited markings and a light buff wash. These birds closely resemble nominate *lagopus* and therefore are largely indistinguishable from Eurasian birds;

Tortie: an intermediate light morph showing richer tortoiseshell tones and more variegated plumage. Such birds are usually assignable to *sanctijohannis* with close examination;

Brindled: a darker light morph, richly marked and strongly patterned, and deeply cinnamon-saturated. These birds are readily identifiable as *sanctijohannis* and as such are the best candidates for identification in Europe.

European or American?

For birders encountering a candidate Rough-legged Hawk in Europe, here's a run-through of ID features to bear in mind when it comes to Nearctic *sanctijohannis* or European *lagopus*. This is by no means diagnostic, but rather a set of converging clues that must be used as a collective whole. Also be aware that worn second-calendar-year birds from late winter onwards will show variable amounts of plumage wear and abrasion, which may impact their appearance.

Pale areas of underparts

In *sanctijohannis*, these are a variably richer, more saturated ('tanned') buff, contrasting with the whiter forehead blaze, chin and marginal coverts along the leading edge of the wing. In *lagopus*, these are cream-buff with colder and frostier tones on average – though note that some recently fledged birds and juvenile females can be more buff.

Trousers

In *sanctijohannis*, the relatively weakly marked warm butterscotch trousers actively contrast against the paler vent and undertail (a 'farmer's tan'). The long crural feathers that aid insulation in this species also appear more unmarked. For this reason, there looks to be greater demarcation between the belly patch ('waistcoat') and the trousers, making the legs look more defined.

In *lagopus*, the trousers are commonly more marked, with streaking on the crural feathers. This gives a less clear-cut contrast between the trousers and the rear end of the belly patch. The colour of these is usually a paler buff rather than rich butterscotch, although warmer-toned birds do occur. Lesser-marked European birds do occur but, in conjunction, with other features this is a supportive of Nearctic birds.

Head and nape

On the head, Nearctic birds show rich orange-brown shaft streaking on a pale background, giving a more mottled tortoiseshell effect. European birds have a paler buff head with more monochromatic shaft streaking, appearing less variegated.

In *sanctijohannis*, the nape often shows a bold dark 'scarf' around the hindneck, abutting a white nape, meaning the demarcation between nape and scarf is often pronounced. In *lagopus* this is more graduated and less contrasted where the white nape meets the dark brown of the hindneck.

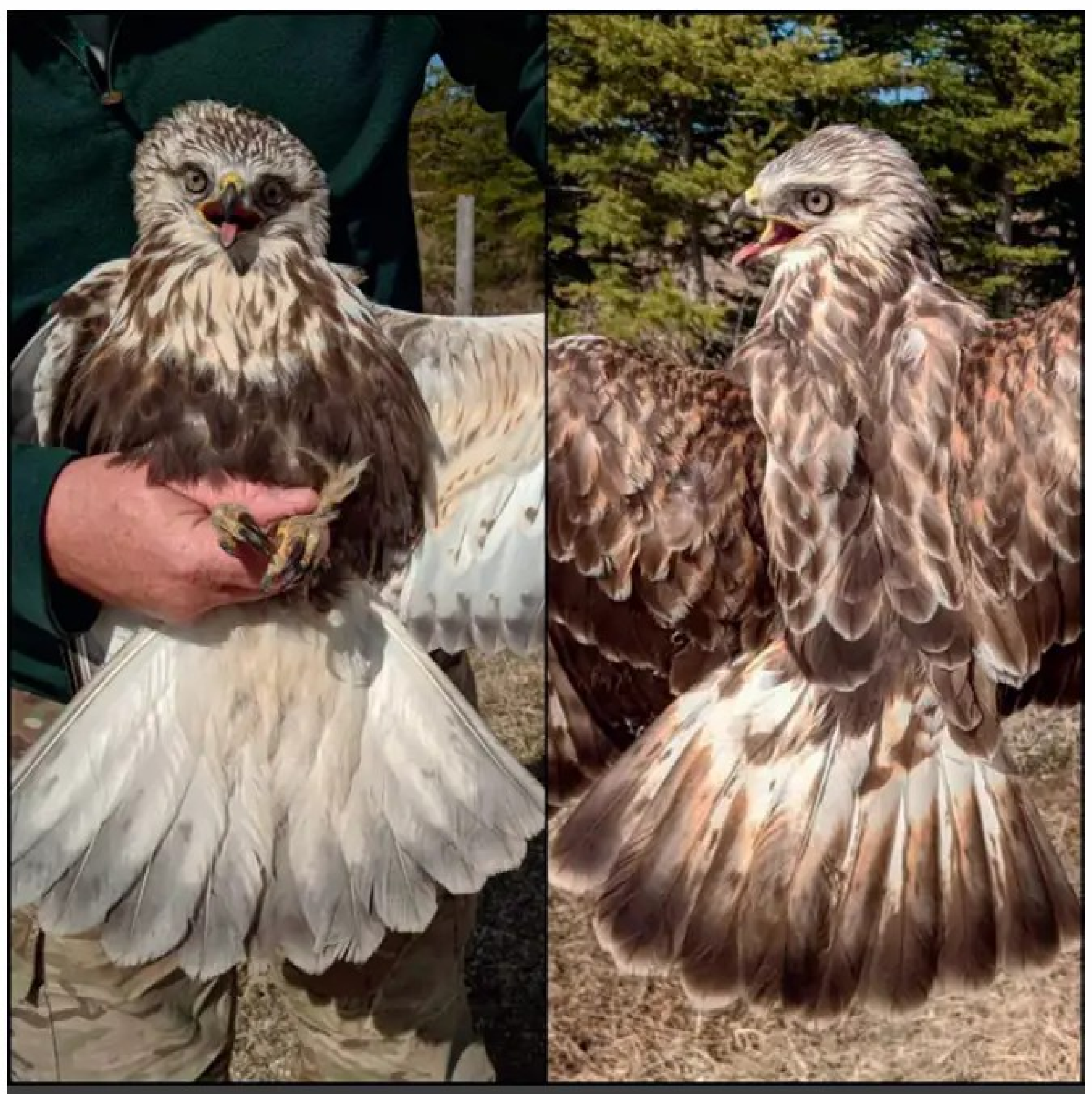
Mantle and scapulars

In *sanctijohannis*, the mantle triangle is a dark blackish. This is further exacerbated by the scapulars, which are dark-centred with a rusty orange 'tortoiseshell' fringing (imagine a Red Kite's mantle pattern transposed onto a *Buteo*). Mantle darkness mirrors the colour of the rump and the fresher second-generation lower scapulars (if they have been replaced).

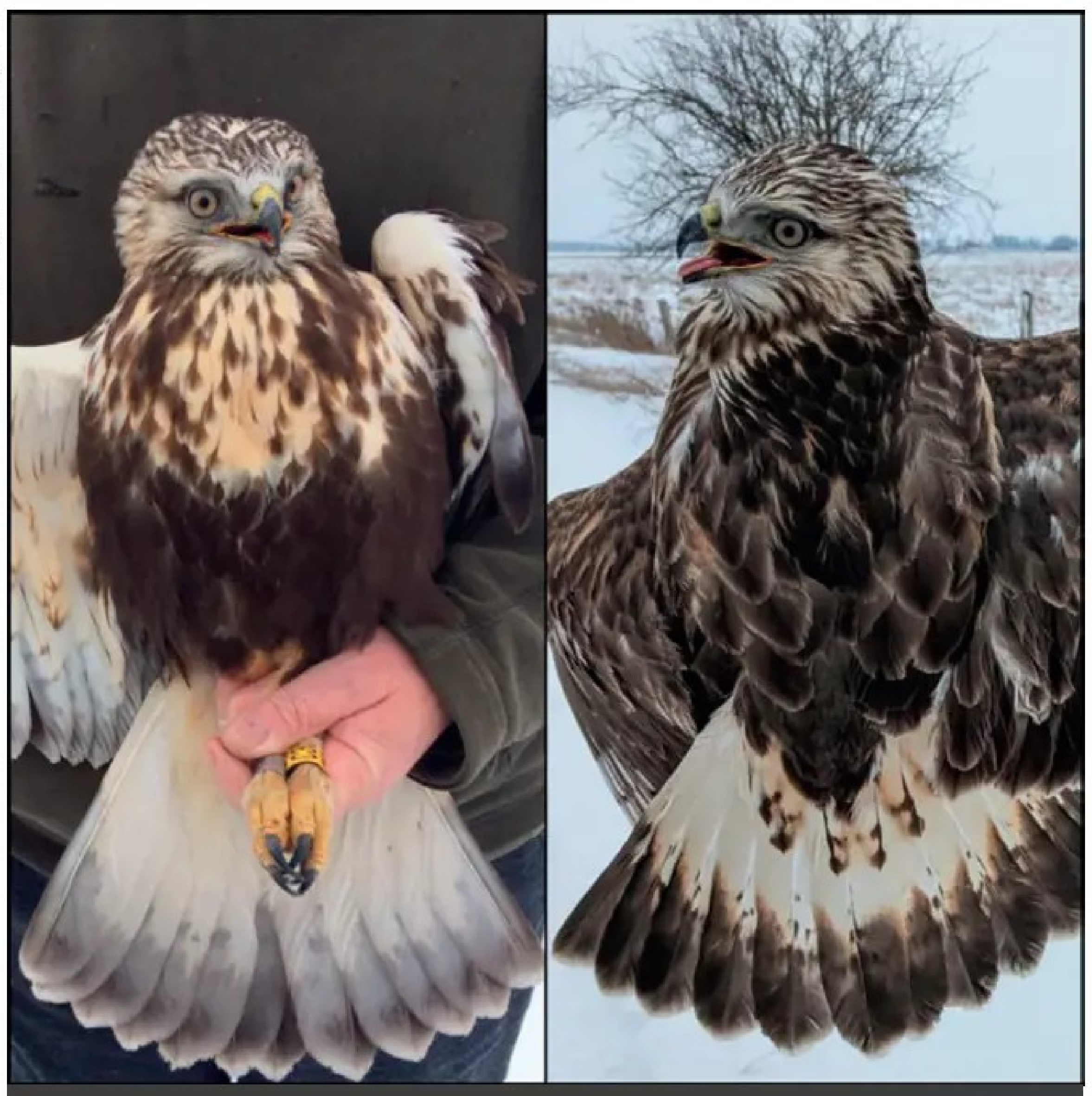
European birds show a dark mantle triangle but this is more brownish-black. They appear frostier-shouldered and tend to have less rusty-coloured outer webs to mantle feathers. The scapulars are paler and less fiery, with orange tones restricted or absent (though this varies between sexes).

Tail pattern

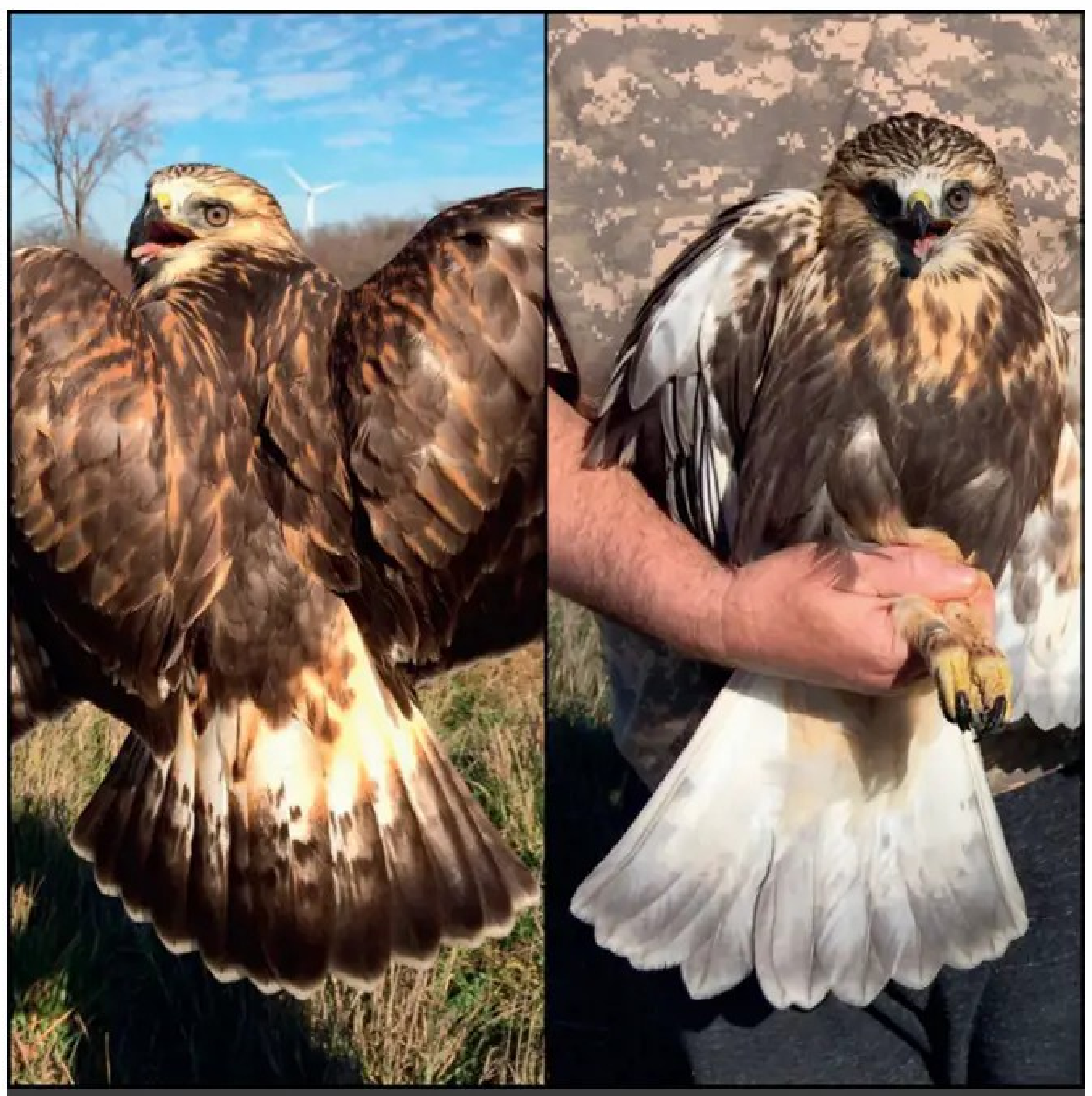
This is a key feature. Nearctic birds commonly show a bold and continuous dark terminal band (not including the thin buff juvenile tip) formed by extensive 'hoof-shaped' tips to each tail feather. The tortoiseshell pigmentation often bleeds up the feather shafts toward the rump, compressing the white tail base. At distance, the tail appears darker and more homogeneous, recalling a rusty juvenile Golden Eagle tail pattern. There is often less prominent transverse tail barring, this being


MALCOLM WILSON

This is a 'calico'-type Rough-legged Hawk, with a pale, frosty and washed-out plumage. Such individuals are largely indistinguishable from European birds in the field and might only draw attention if found in western parts of Europe.


MALCOLM WILSON

'Tortie' Rough-legged Hawks show a more variegated plumage with warmer tortoiseshell tones. Such birds are usually assignable to *sanctijohannis* with careful study of the features outlined within this article.


MALCOLM WILSON

'Brindled' Rough-legged Hawks are richly marked and strongly patterned, showing cinnamon tones to much of the plumage including the tail and upperparts. These birds are readily identifiable as *sanctijohannis* in a vagrant context.

masked by the solid hoof pattern.

Meanwhile, *lagopus* generally shows more 'fragmentation' in the tail band, composed of a series of consecutive transverse bars. The barring averages sharper and more segmented, with multiple narrow bars. The pale tail base appears whiter and more extensive, with the overall tone being colder and more washed-out, lacking the tortoiseshell hues of *sanctijohannis*.

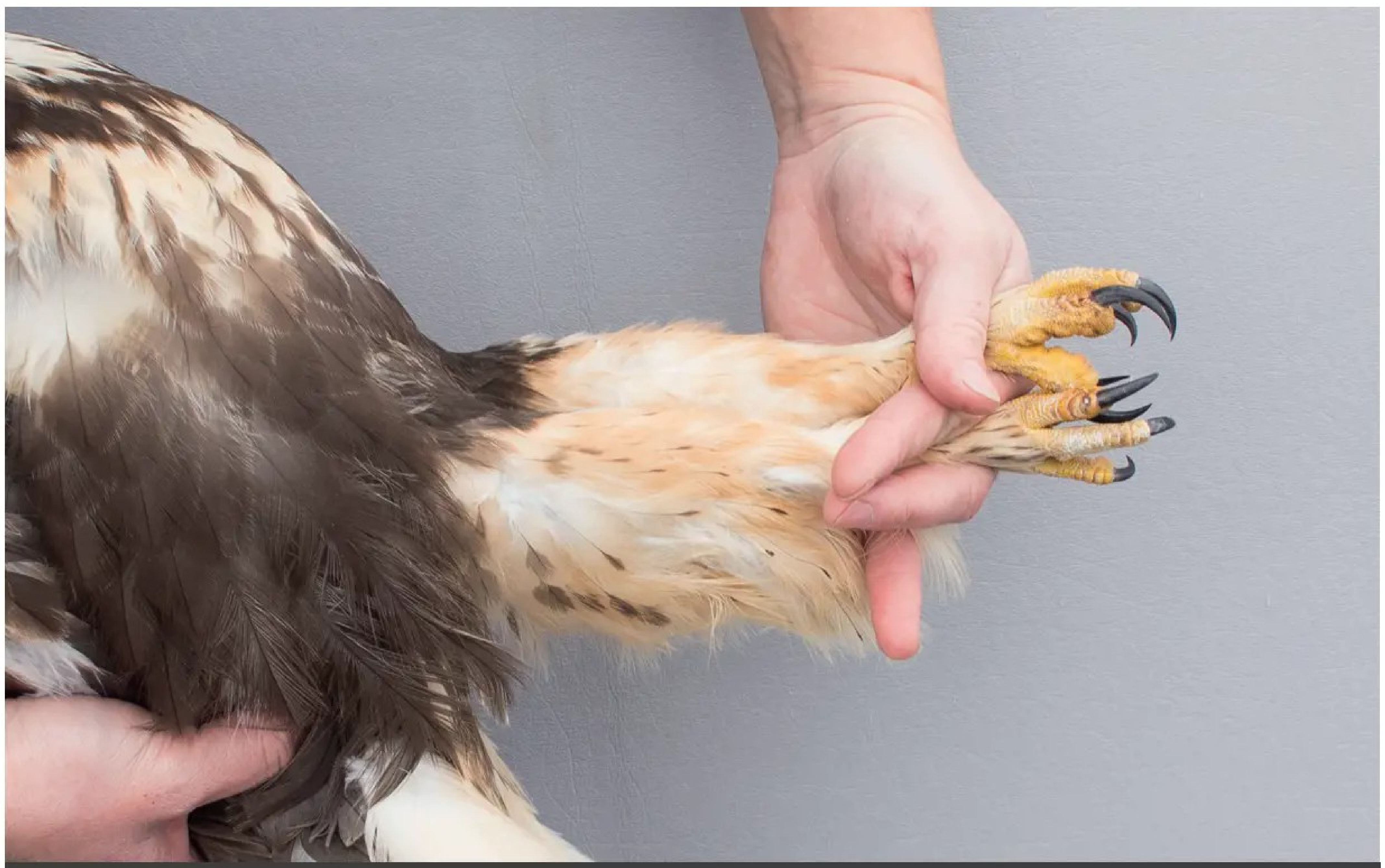
Rump and uppertail coverts

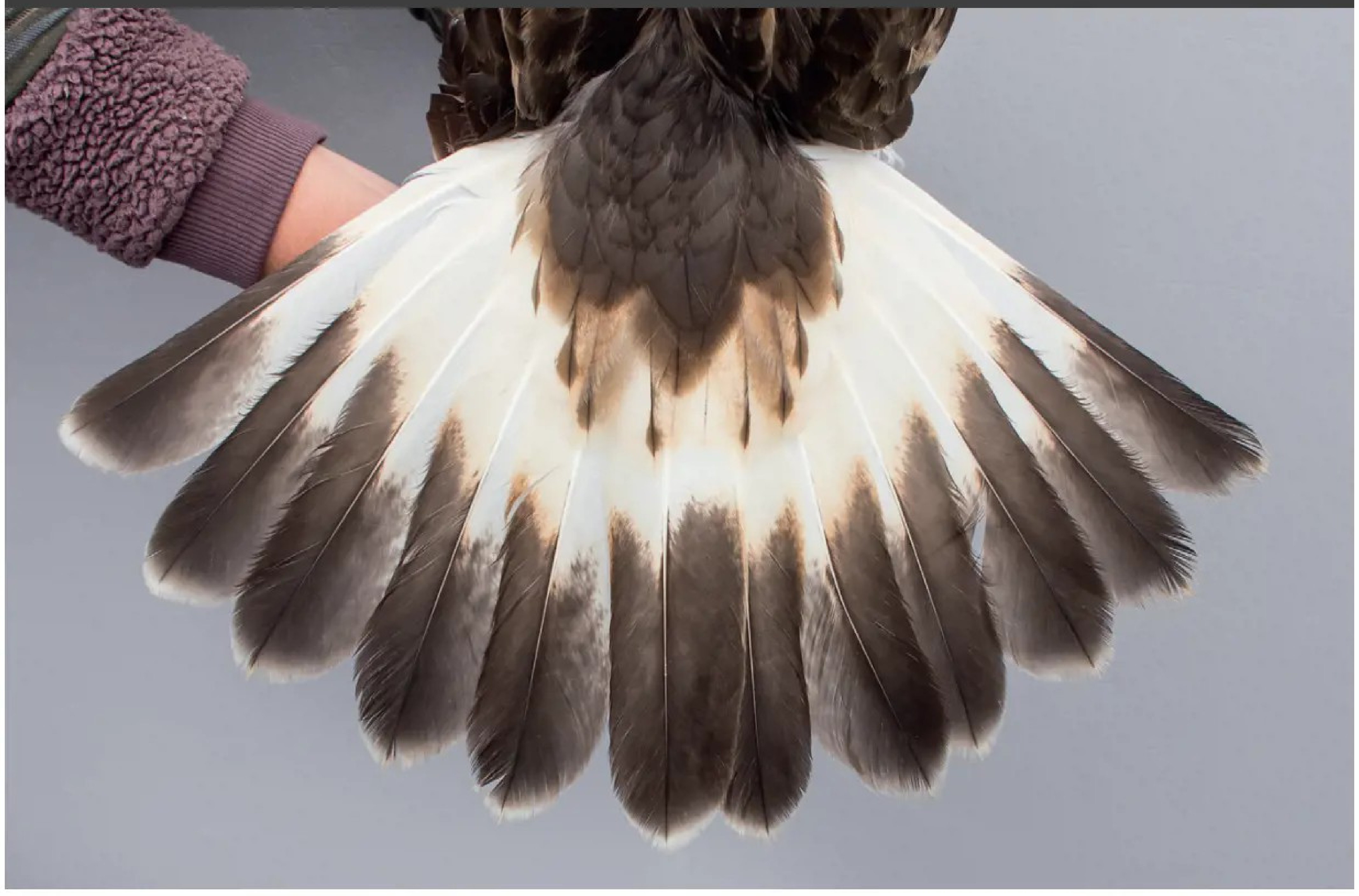
In *sanctijohannis*, the longest uppertail covert feathers show a variable orange hue which matches the basal side of the tail band. Some birds show a complete auburn crescent around a dark rump. Some of these orange feathers show frosty white tips, giving the distal rump a scalloped look. The rump colour seems to match the colour accent of the mantle triangle and corresponding dorsal side.

Meanwhile, *lagopus* shows a less dark, browner rump. The uppertail coverts again show frosty tips but these are not as strongly defined due to the lack of orange tones in these feathers, and this subspecies doesn't show the vividly dark rump bordered by an auburn crescent as seen in some Nearctic birds. Once again, the rump colour seems to match the colour of the mantle triangle.

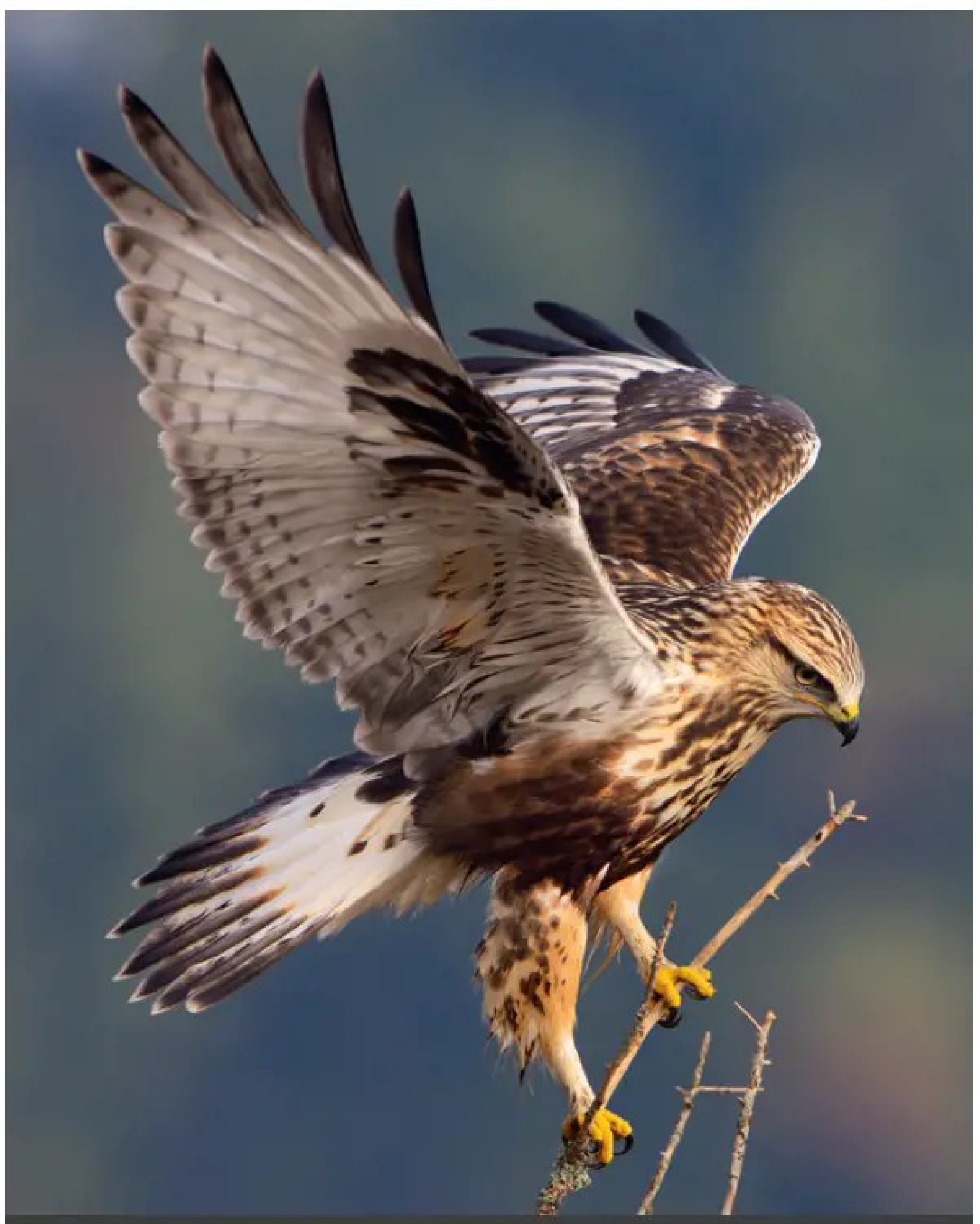
Upperwing

The wing coverts are more variegated in *sanctijohannis*. The median coverts often appear richly patterned; each feather being dark-centred with wide cinnamon inner webs and pale edges which forms a tricoloured mosaic. Additionally, the outer greater coverts seem to have a real richness in tone with a blackish sheen, although this requires further

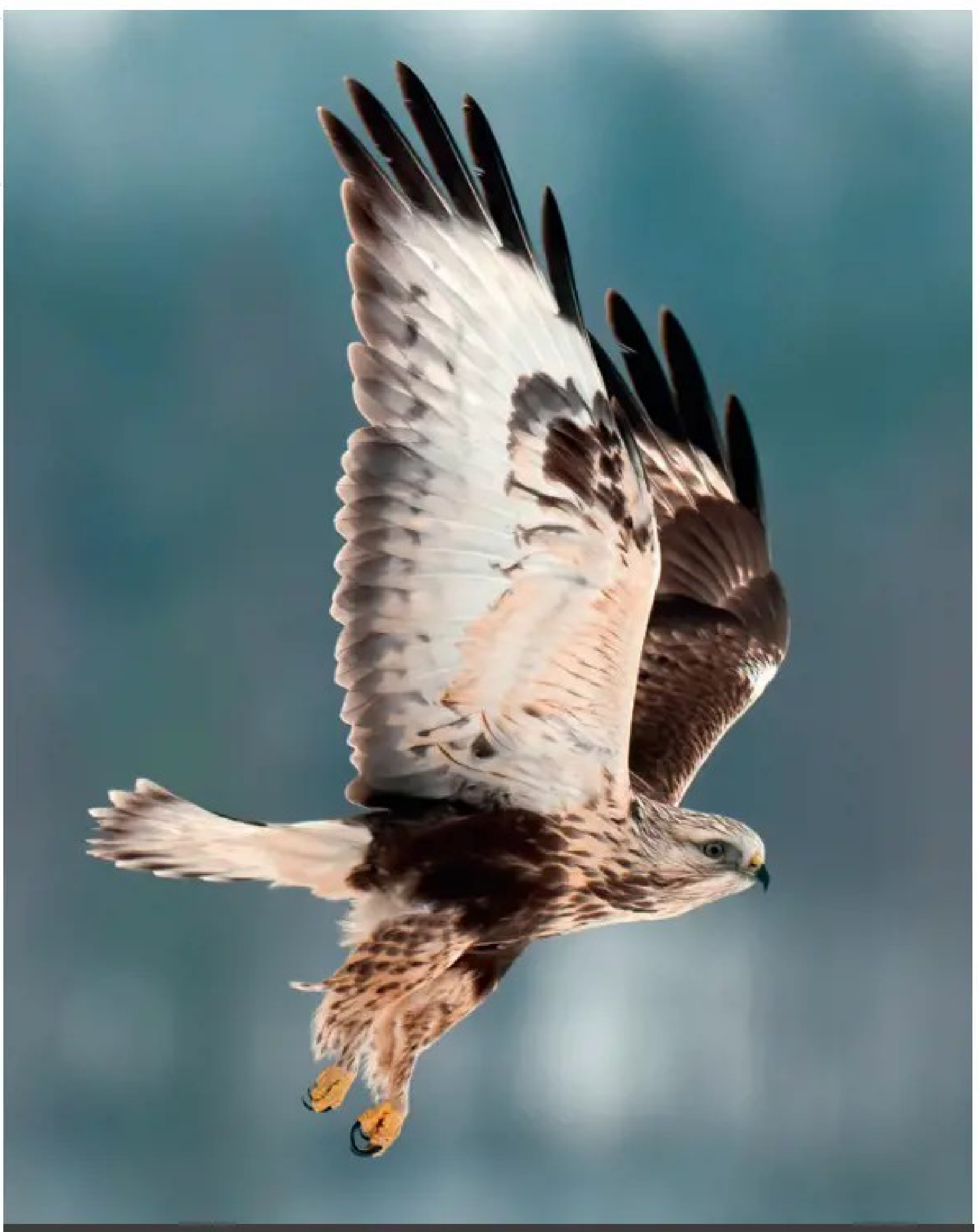

NICOLE RICHARDSON


NICOLE RICHARDSON

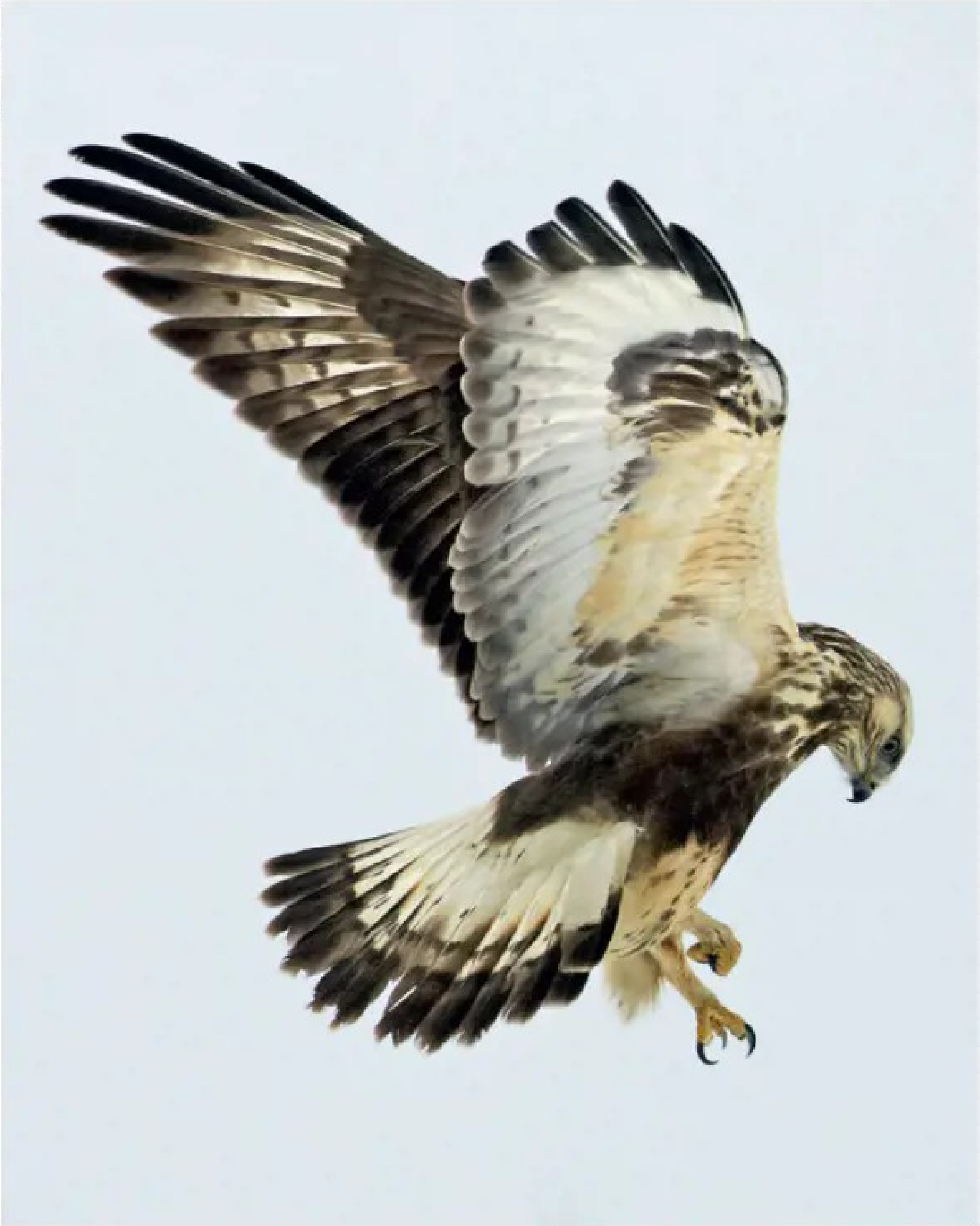
Pale-morph Rough-legged Hawk identification is tricky, often being built up through a series of 'soft' features that when combined can lead to a more confident diagnosis. This individual, photographed in December in Canada, shows two of these: the relatively unmarked buff trousers neatly contrasting from the brown belly (above) and a solid blackish tail band and dark brown rump with rufous tones in the uppertail coverts and on the proximal side of the tail band.


TIM ZUROWSKI (BIA)

The richly toned plumage, with orange hues apparent in the tail and rump, help to signal that this is a Nearctic bird. However, note the heavily patterned 'trousers'.


KARI EISCHER (AGAMI.NL)

This bird lacks rufous tones and the thighs are heavily patterned. There is little to indicate a potential Nearctic bird on show; indeed, it was photographed in Finland.


MARKUS VARESVUO (AGAMI.NL)

This is another typical European bird from Finland. Note the lack of warm tones, the clean white uppertail coverts and the subterminal barring on the tail.

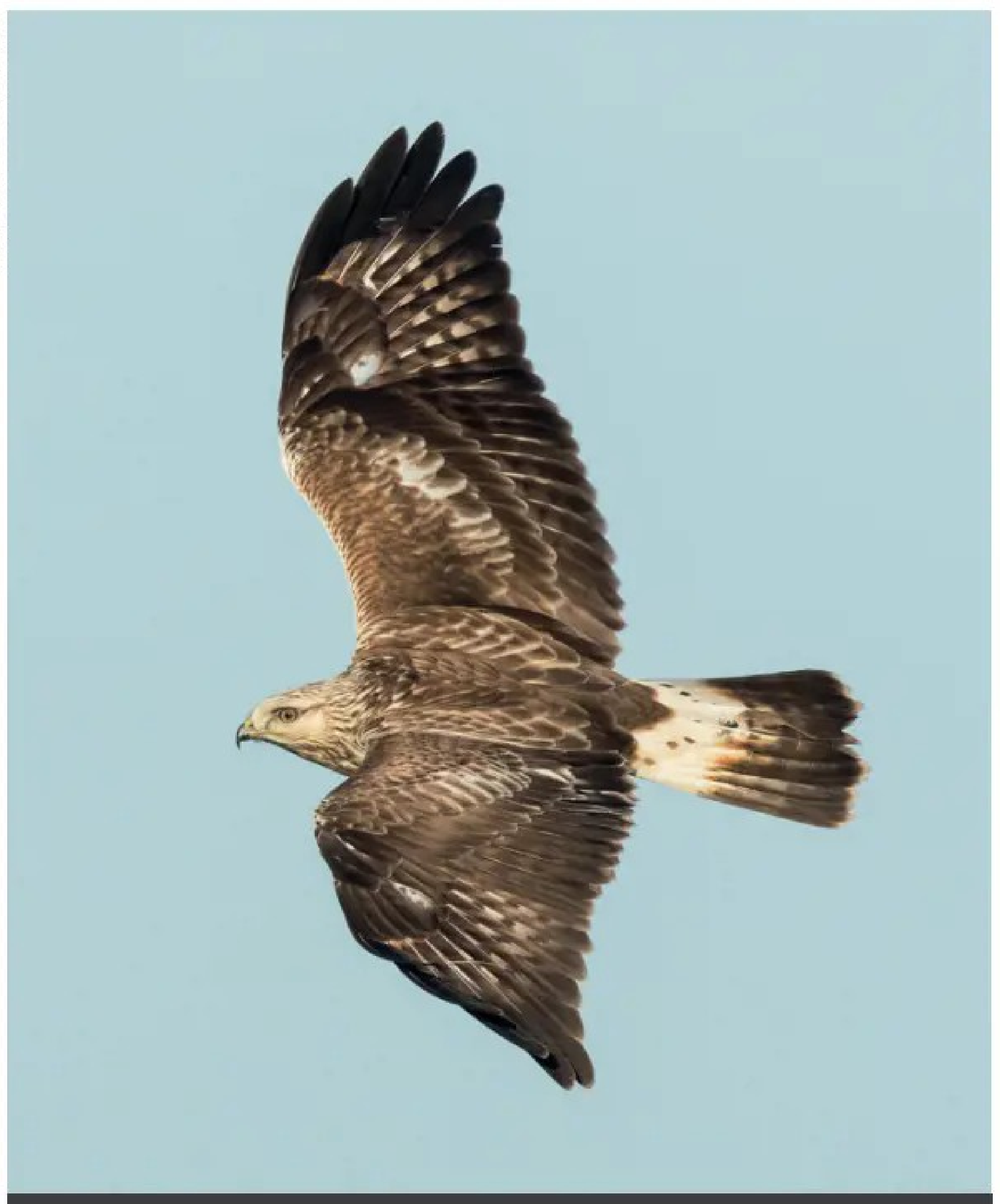
study. Meanwhile, *lagopus* appears to have a plainer wing panel, being more two-toned and mirroring the scapular braces. Although darker than the other upperwing feathers, the greater coverts don't appear as dark or as 'oily-looking' as in Nearctic birds.

Timing and vagrancy

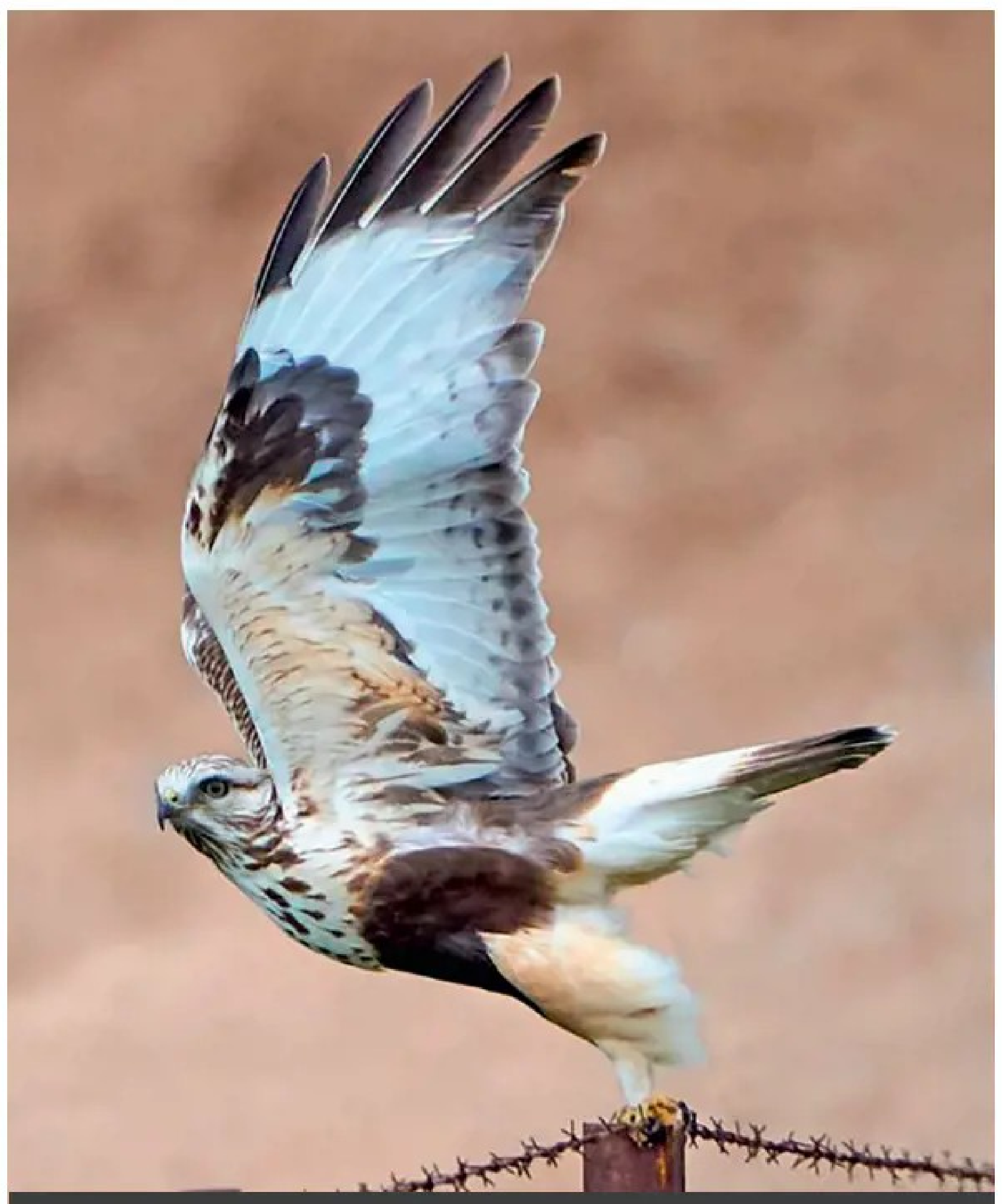
The arrival of any Rough-legged Hawks in Europe is a tapestry woven from weather, prey cycles and pure chance. Inexperienced, newly fledged juveniles are naturally prone to wandering as they lack established migratory memory. During lemming-boom years, when breeding productivity peaks, the number of dispersing young in eastern Canada increases dramatically, thereby heightening the potential for vagrancy.

As these birds migrate south in early October to escape the onset of winter, some individuals following a more coastal route can become caught in strong westerlies or cyclonic systems, driving them toward the Grand Banks and sweeping them far east into the Atlantic Ocean. It is not uncommon for vagrant Rough-legged Hawks to be ship-assisted, taking temporary refuge on vessels when blown off course. The same applies to Snowy Owls, which are influenced by the same prey cycles. The autumns of 2013 and 2024 saw notable influxes of *sanctijohannis* into Western Europe.

Autumn 2024 provided a remarkable field test for pale-morph Rough-legged Hawk identification criteria. At least a dozen strong candidate juvenile *sanctijohannis* appeared across Western Europe, with the majority making landfall in the Azores and Iberia. British and Irish birders also joined the action with birds in Co Antrim and Cornwall.


PAUL COOMBES

This bird wintered in South Yorkshire in 2020. Its appearance fits well within the range of *lagopus* and the easterly location is also typical for wintering European birds.


JUAN SAGARDIA

This bird was in Spain in March 2025. The unmarked thighs, solid tail band and rufous tones all point to *sanctijohannis*, of which there was an influx into Europe that winter.

Although most of the records concerned pale morphs, many were photographed well and showed the distinctive tortoiseshell features characteristic of a Nearctic origin. Each record adds weight to the idea that *sanctijohannis* may in fact be a regular transatlantic vagrant much in the manner of Northern Harrier, which appears to be annual these days.

Field notes to framework

Identifying *sanctijohannis* in the field remains as much an art as a science. Biometrics and DNA will always offer greater certainty, but as photographic documentation and collective awareness of pale morphs improves, plumage-based assessment of this subspecies will hopefully become more reliable.

Beyond the ID puzzle lies a larger story. As the Arctic warms, its simple, delicately balanced food webs are being shaken. Lemming cycles are becoming less predictable, storms more frequent, and sea ice and permafrost thinner. All these changes ripple through the ecosystem – and through the movements of predators such as Rough-legged Hawk.

The thrill of this study isn't just in nailing an ID – it's in the sense of shared wonder. Every birder who has watched a Rough-legged Buzzard hovering over a winter field knows that feeling: a blend of admiration, curiosity and awe at the bird's necessity to survive.

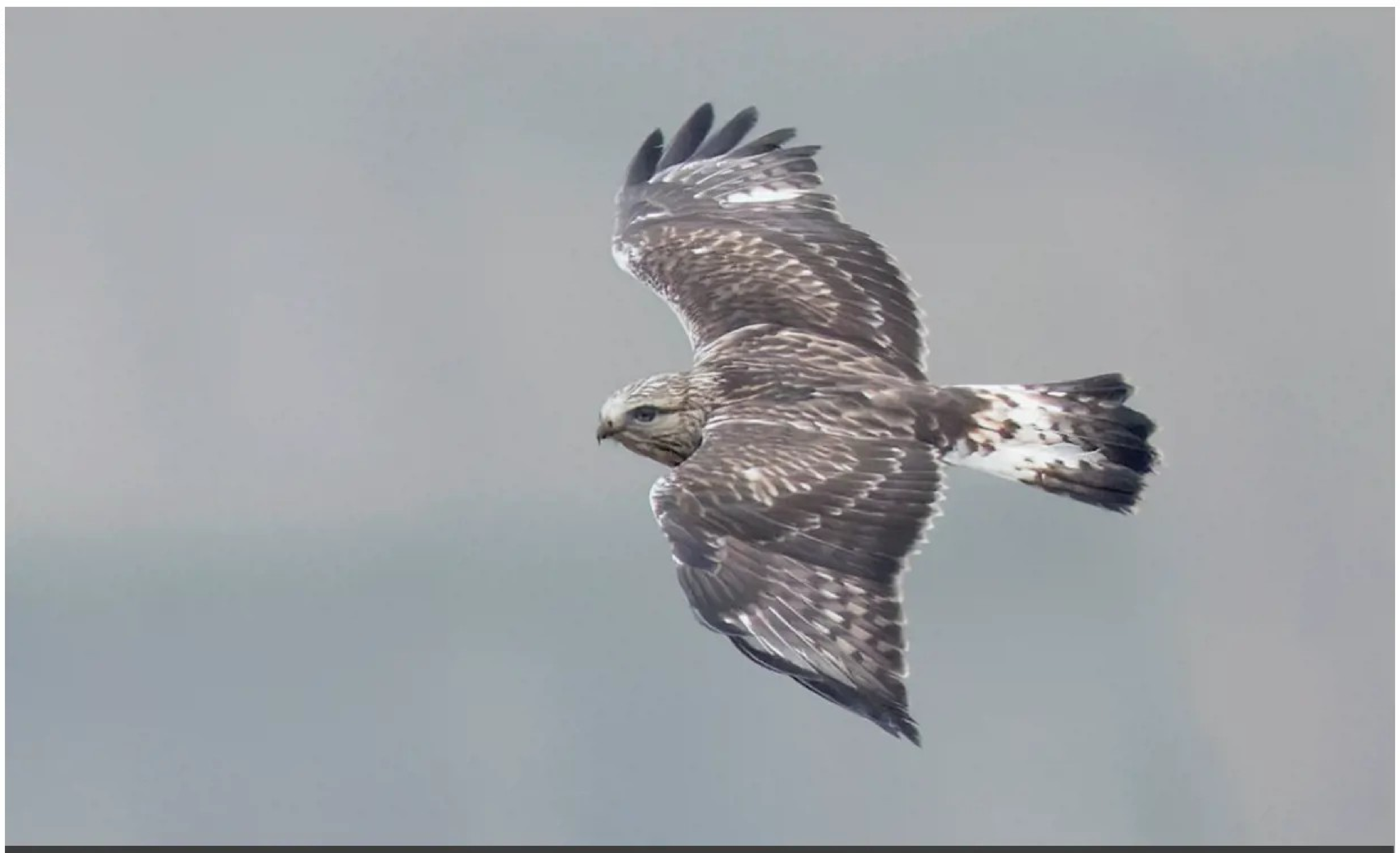
These Nearctic wanderers remind us that the boundaries we draw – continents, checklist and taxonomy – mean little to the birds themselves. They move by wind and instinct, by hunger and weather.

So, this winter, if a Rough-legged Buzzard wheels into view, take a second look – it might not only be a traveller from a northern latitude, but also from another continent, where the interplay of geography and genetics produces a subject of real beauty.

Ask yourself: is the bird richly coloured with tortoiseshell upperparts, a complete dark tail band and clean, butterscotch trousers? If so, it could be a good candidate for a pale-morph *sanctijohannis* – especially if you're being buffeted by a westerly gale!

Generate a mental checklist of the features discussed here and systematically work through them. Although each feature alone may be misleading, together they build a clearer picture. Don't be afraid to get things wrong – there is plenty of trial and error in raptor identification. Remember that not all birds will be assignable to subspecies.

This pragmatic approach should help guide you in determining whether the bird you're watching hails from Lapland or the Labrador coast. ■


MICHAEL MCKEE

This bird was seen in Cornwall in autumn 2024 during a notable influx of Rough-legged Hawks to Europe. Rough-legged Buzzard is very rare in south-west England and, purely based on the context of its arrival, Nearctic origin (and thus a 'calico'-type) seems likely. However, it shows several features typical of European birds and is therefore not safely identifiable on field views.

Island of dreams

With wildfowl in abundance, spectacular raptors and much more, ***Dan Brown*** explains that winter birding on Islay has a lot to offer.

Above: Islay is famous for its wintering geese, which migrate from Arctic breeding grounds to overwinter on the island. Tens of thousands of birds arrive, including some 60% of Greenland's breeding population of Barnacle Goose.

Islay, the magnificent Queen of the Hebrides. A hot-spot for winter birding, a refuge for abundant birdlife and a welcoming birding community; what more could you ask for in a destination? Whisky? It's got that too.

It's an island that keeps on giving. Since my first visit I have been drawn back many times, including for a prolonged stay from October to December 2020 as part of the BBC's *Wild Isles* production team working on White-tailed Eagles. This provided a brilliant opportunity to get to know the island and its hidden sites. It really is a haven. I always remark on the visible abundance of birds that winter on the island, which is testament to well-managed reserves, a variety of habitats, less intensive land use and a mild year-round climate. Flocks of finches, geese, waders and thrushes, starling murmurations; you get the idea. There are a lot of birds that winter here, making it a fabulous place to visit, explore and enjoy simply to take it this profusion, but also with the draw of many charismatic, scarce and sometimes rare species.

Islay is the southernmost of the Hebrides. Look south from its cliffs and the Irish coastline extends away along the horizon. Look east and Gigha and Kintyre create an undulating vista, while to the north Oronsay and Colonsay bleed into the skyline of Mull. It's a dramatic setting and a prime position. The island is large enough to offer plenty of sites to explore each day for a week, but small enough that nowhere is more than 15 miles from the centre of it at Bowmore/Bridgend.

Varied habitats

Islay has a unique anvil shape that creates two large and sheltered lochs separated by a low-lying ridge and bog; Loch Gruinart to the north and Loch Indaal to the south. These differ hugely, with one a shallow and highly tidal estuary and the other a deeper sea loch (but still with a large mudflat at its head). A line of heather-clad hills known as the Rinns flank the west of the island, while further east a cluster of larger hills dominate the landmass and include peaks up to 491 m – the highest on the island.

The coasts are varied and wild. The west has a mix of storm-battered sandy bays, rocky shores and exposed headlands. The east is more sheltered with many small bays creating a maze of waterways and islets backed by more extensive pockets of Atlantic rainforest. There is also an extensive area of broadleaved forest around Loch Skerrols in the centre of the island. The loch itself is the best freshwater site on Islay and always worth a scan. Distillery jetties, village harbours, Atlantic rainforest, west-coast lowland heath, sand-dune systems, flooded scrapes, ploughed and pasture fields all make up a brilliant mosaic of habitats and sites, with every single one worthy of birding exploration. So, what are you likely to see?

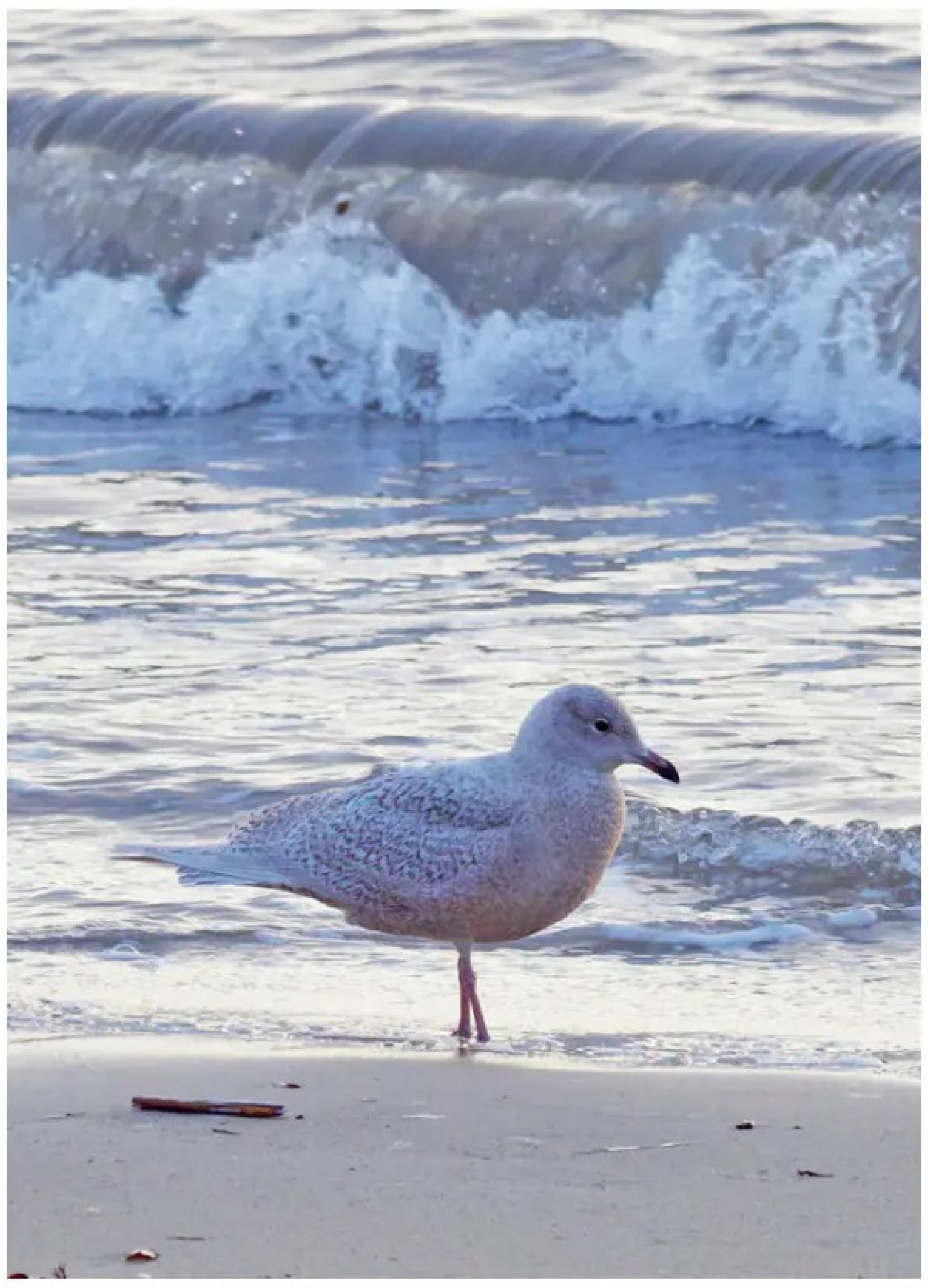
Key species

A winter visit to Islay has become famed for the incredible assemblage of geese, including more than 30,000 Barnacle and 6,000 Greenland White-fronted Geese, while Greylag is similarly common. However, careful scrutiny of flocks will usually reveal something more unexpected. There are normally a handful of Pink-footed Geese and the occasional Russian White-fronted Goose, Snow Goose and, over the past few years, Red-breasted Goose. Islay is *the* place to see Cackling Goose in the UK, although vagrant Todd's Canada Goose is now becoming difficult to unravel from an increasing feral population of Canada Geese.

The island hosts an excellent array of other wildfowl. Wintering seaduck include Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Common Eider and Common Scoter. Northern Pintail and Brent Goose gather on the estuaries and scrapes and the freshwater lochs hold the usual array of duck that frequently include rarities, with multiple Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, Green-winged Teal and American Wigeon recorded over the past few years. Scan the sea lochs for all three commoner winter divers and Slavonian Grebe.

Loch Gruinart and Loch Indaal hold good numbers of waders on the mudflats and surrounding pasture and scrapes. Flocks including Red Knot, Bar-tailed Godwit, Dunlin, Sanderling, European Golden Plover and Eurasian Curlew are worth scanning for something more unusual. Gulls winter in good numbers around the coast and both Glaucous and Iceland are regular visitors, with rarities such as Bonaparte's Gull also recorded.

Inland areas where pheasants are fed often hold good numbers of finches and buntings, while flocks of Eurasian Skylark and pipits gather on the pasture and stubble fields. The abundance of prey means good raptor populations.



Winter sees white-winged gulls, such as Iceland Gull, arrive on Islay in varying numbers each year, typically after storms. Bowmore and Loch Indaal are particularly productive sites.

The geology of Islay is exceptionally diverse for what is rather a small area, ranging from ancient Precambrian metamorphic rock to more recent glacial and volcanic features. These varied formations explain the island's divided topography, with the rugged, hilly Rinns to the west (pictured here) and the more fertile, lower-lying eastern areas.

ALL PHOTOS: DAN BROWN

Merlin and Peregrine Falcon are regularly seen tearing through the flocks, while the island boasts impressive numbers of wintering Hen Harriers that can be seen anywhere, and Barn Owls are frequently encountered at dusk.

The biggest raptor highlights – literally and metaphorically – are the eagles, and Islay harbours healthy populations of both species. White-tailed Eagle has been increasing as the birds learn that winter goose flocks mean plenty to eat. Small aggregations are not uncommon, with a maximum of 17 noted together at Loch Gruinart a few years ago. Golden Eagles are significantly less social and much shyer but can still be seen along almost any ridge across the island.

Anything can turn up and birder coverage in midwinter is generally sparse, offering great opportunities for finding rarities. November has produced American Redstart, Laughing Gull, Pallid Swift, Lesser Grey Shrike, Isabelline Wheatear and Pallid Harrier. There are several winter records of Gyr Falcon and Harlequin Duck, while Ivory Gull and Killdeer have made appearances in January. At the very least you'll have an abundance of birds and almost no one else around during winter.

Key sites and hot-spots

The beauty of Islay is that there is a site for every condition and every birding interest, whether it's passerines, winter gulls, wildfowl or seawatching. The following sites should feature in any visit.

Loch Gruinart RSPB

This superb farmland reserve is the most diverse site. The small, unmanned visitor centre is a great place from which to scan the wider area; it has toilets, lots of information and parking, with additional parking 400 m to the north and closer to the hides. There are two trails, the moorland trail and the woodland trail, with the latter leading to two hides that overlook the freshwater scrapes adjoining the estuary. Take the lane that crosses Gruinart Flats and scan the goose flocks from your vehicle. The estuary can be viewed from the eastern lane between Craigens and Killinallan.

Despite marked national declines, the population of Twite on Islay is healthy, thanks to sustained conservation efforts by the RSPB.

Islay is a hugely important wintering site for the threatened Greenland White-fronted Goose, with the island hosting a significant amount of the global population.

Target birds: Golden and White-tailed Eagles, Hen Harrier, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese and rarer goose species, freshwater wildfowl with the possibility of Green-winged Teal, waders roosting at high tide on the scrapes and south-east corner of estuary.

Ardnave

This stunning sand-dune system at the north-west tip of Islay is a great place for a walk. Park next to Ardnave Loch, which is worth scanning for wildfowl, and the track circles the peninsula. The dunes are important for feeding Chough, while White-tailed Eagles frequently hang overhead or visit Nave Island offshore.

Target birds: Chough, White-tailed Eagle, Snow Bunting, European Golden Plover, Sanderling and Whooper Swan.

The Oa RSPB

A two-mile circular trail from the car park to the stunning cliffs and American monument takes in some spectacular coastal scenery and wild open moor.

Target birds: Golden and White-tailed Eagles, Chough, Merlin and Twite.

Loch Indaal

This huge sea loch has several sites that can produce a great range of coastal birds, from divers and grebes to waders and gulls.

Bridgend Merse (saltmarsh): The head of the loch can be viewed from the small lay-by on the east side just south of Sand Lodge, as well as the along the northern road and at Carnain. All of these sites should be checked and are especially productive either side of high tide. The mudflats are great for waders and a pair of White-tailed Eagles is often on the deck. This is a key roosting site for Barnacle Geese and flocks can look and sound spectacular at dawn and dusk.

Target birds: Bar-tailed Godwit, Red Knot, Sanderling, European Golden Plover, Barnacle, Cackling and Brent Geese, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon and White-tailed Eagle.

Bowmore: The village has a small harbour that is worth a check – occasionally seaduck including Long-tailed Duck come right into the sheltered waters. The open coast either side occasionally holds Purple Sandpiper.

Blackrock: Scan the coast just off the hamlet for seaduck; 400 m south-west is a large lay-by on a raised bluff that is excellent for scanning the wider loch.

Target birds: Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter, Common Eider, Slavonian Grebe, Red-throated, Black-throated and Great Northern Divers and White-tailed Eagle.

Bruichladdich and Port Charlotte: Two villages flanked by open and rocky coasts. Check for species of open, exposed shorelines, and also for otter. Scan from Bruichladdich pier (good for Black Guillemot) or the several lay-bys that offer good viewing opportunities. Port Charlotte has a sheltered bay that can often host confiding Great Northern Divers.

Target birds: Purple Sandpiper, Black Guillemot, divers, seaduck and winter gulls.

Portnahaven

This little village at the far south-west of the island is nestled around a superb natural harbour that provides a haven from winter weather. It is well worth checking for storm-driven gulls and phalaropes, and once hosted an American Redstart.

Loch Skerrols

This large freshwater loch in the centre of the island is great for freshwater wildfowl, which should be scrutinised for rarer species. Woodland surrounding the loch is the best area for all typical forest birds on the island. White-tailed Eagles are frequent around the loch.

Target birds: Freshwater wildfowl – check for Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck and American Wigeon. Long-tailed Duck occasionally feed here. Woodland birds.

Bridgend

This small village in the centre of the island is bisected by the River Sorn, which now has a lovely forest path running alongside it.

Target birds: Dipper, Grey Wagtail, woodland birds.

Jura

The neighbouring island of Jura is well worth a visit. A five-minute ro-ro ferry journey from Port Askaig takes you straight to the start of Jura's only road. This single-track lane runs for 25 miles across wild moorland and flanks the east side of the island. Jura is excellent for raptors, including both eagle species, as well as flocks of finches and thrushes. The sheltered waters around Craighouse are worth checking for divers, mergansers and auks, while any coastal area can be good for Eurasian Otter.

Winter storms

Islay's position on the Atlantic coast means it can be at the mercy of powerful winter storms. At the very least they can be spectacular to watch, but they also frequently throw seabirds inshore and occasionally in to sheltered bays. Places such as Portnahaven, Machair and Saligo Bays are good spots to check. The first site can harbour storm-driven waifs in the bay, while the flooded fields behind Machair Bay are also worth checking for birds such as phalaropes.

During the winter, Greater Scaup is readily encountered on Islay. especially during winter. Several hundred are normally present in coastal locales, with flocks of up to 1,000 rarely seen.

Ferry journey

While it is possible to fly to Islay it is much more fun to hop on the CalMac ferry from Kennacraig and take the two-hour sailing across the Sound of Jura (see below); it can also be great for birding. From the moment you board the ferry in Kennacraig White-tailed Eagles are possible over the horizons. The ferry heads west down West Tarbert Loch, which is a superb place for divers with three species present year-round alongside Slavonian and occasionally Red-necked Grebes, Black Guillemot and Common Eider. As the coast opens up into the Sound of Gigha you can notch up almost three-figure counts of Great Northern Divers and a better variety of seaduck including Long-tailed Duck and scoter. The section between Gigha and Islay (the Sound of Jura) is generally quieter but it's always worth keeping your eyes peeled for seabirds and as you approach the Islay coast – White-tailed Eagles can frequently be seen.

Other places of interest

In addition to Islay's key hot-spots, good birds can turn up just about anywhere! Coniferous forests often harbour feeding groups of Common Crossbills, wet moorland can have quartering Hen Harriers and Golden Eagles, and the likes of Bunnahabhain Distillery are worth checking for birds washing through the Sound of Islay – it even had a wintering Iceland Gull for several years on the trot. Keep your eyes peeled for flocks of European Golden Plover on the pasture fields, especially around Gruinart and Loch Gorm in the west. The old road between Bowmore and Port Ellen is worth driving slowly while watching for raptors and flocks of Greenland White-fronted Geese grazing in the rushes. Similarly, check the road circling Loch Gorm, stopping to scan the fields and also the loch itself for diving duck.

Best birding route

The easiest way to reach Islay is on the CalMac ferry departing Kennacraig (Kintyre) and arriving at either Port Askaig or Port Ellen. The route is a great way to start and end your visit (see above). There is an additional CalMac ferry route from Oban via Colonsay although this is less regular and longer. You can also fly to Islay from Glasgow International Airport. ■

Islay is the last stronghold for Chough in Scotland. It is a species facing serious decline and potential extinction in the country. The island's population is small and isolated, with numbers of breeding pairs falling from 95 in 1986 to some 39 by 2013, with 40 the current estimate.

Resources

- Islay Bird Blog: **islaybirds.blogspot.com**
- Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) Where to Watch Birds in Scotland app

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jim Dickson and Peter Roberts for their factual assistance and local expertise.

LES CATER (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Where eagles fly again

Fifty years after the reintroduction started in earnest, ***Dave Sexton*** looks at how White-tailed Eagles are once again soaring in our skies.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the reintroduction of White-tailed Eagle to Scotland, with the first successful scheme starting on the Isle of Rum in 1975.

The memory of your first sighting of a White-tailed Eagle never leaves you. Mine was 45 years ago! I was on holiday on the Isle of Mull with my good friend Eric Kidd. We were both aware of the project to reintroduce the species, which is also known as the 'sea eagle', to Scotland and that the Isle of Rum to the north of Mull was where it was happening. We never dreamed we'd actually see one, but in May 1980, as we drove slowly towards Tobermory along the shores of Loch Spelve after a day watching otters, something very big caught our eyes.

For some inexplicable reason I was recording our chat on a cassette player. I still have that recording. Eric asked: "Anyway, what's that big bird flapping over the loch?" I slammed on the brakes and we both leapt out. Luckily there was no other traffic! And there it was. An adult White-tailed Eagle was flapping hard just above the waves with Hooded Crows on its tail. It gained a bit of height and went up over the road and across the moorland until it broke the skyline, where it soared in wide, lazy circles in the beautiful blue sky. It left the crows far behind as it slipped below the horizon and our magical, memorable encounter was over. We just looked at each other with that 'what the hell just happened?' kind of look. It was a sighting that would change the course of my life.

Persecution campaign

As exciting and thrilling as that sighting was, the bird should never have been such a rarity. Victorian gamekeepers, farmers, taxidermists and egg collectors (among others) should never have pushed the species to the brink of extinction … and then over it. The popular narrative says that the last lonely male eagle, whose mate had been killed a decade earlier, sat day after day watching the far horizon for any sign of her or indeed any other of his kind, but to no avail. They'd all been killed, one by one. Finally, one fateful day in 1918, he too was shot and so the native British White-tailed Eagle was gone forever. A dark day in UK conservation history.

The story is probably mostly true. However, looking back through old Highland estate game books and some newspaper accounts, it seems likely that the odd individual White-tailed Eagle did survive for a few more years. Possibly immatures, single birds roaming the vast expanses of the Scottish Highlands and Islands in search of others of their kind. Those final few also inevitably ended up being trapped, shot or poisoned. They were relatively easy to get rid of, hanging around their nests if disturbed and remaining within the range of guns. They would readily feed at a sheep or deer carcass, often with other birds, so poisoning them was no trouble.

While the same perpetrators were also trying to get rid of Golden Eagles, that species was (and still is) much harder work. In the end, with fewer gamekeepers around after World War I, Golden Eagles just about survived. Osprey, Eurasian Goshawk, Red Kite and mammals such as European Wildcat and Pine Marten were all ruthlessly persecuted. By the end of the war, however, the sad fate of White-tailed Eagle had been sealed.

RSPB-IMAGES.COM

Roy Dennis and George Waterston with a recently released juvenile White-tailed Eagle on Fair Isle, Shetland, in 1968. This was one of the earliest attempts to re-establish the species in Britain.

First steps

Fast forward 40 years and the first-ever attempt at a reintroduction in Britain took place at Glen Etive, Argyll. I pass the site regularly while travelling to and from Oban and Mull on the train or bus, and I think of that early pioneering effort. In July 1959, Pat Sandeman received one adult and two immature White-tailed Eagles from Norway, where they'd been taken by someone to claim a financial bounty. They were all tethered, fed from a Red Deer carcass and released two weeks later. By this time the adult had become too tame, so it was soon recaptured and taken to London Zoo and then Edinburgh Zoo. One of the immatures survived for six months but eventually was killed in a fox trap some 50 miles to the south. The other immature was never seen again. It's fair to say this reintroduction attempt had failed, but it showed that the will was there to at least try something.

Nearly a decade later, in 1968, a second more serious attempt on Fair Isle, Shetland, was certainly not a failure. While it didn't realise its goals completely, it paved the way for future projects. The driving force behind it were RSPB director George Waterston and bird-observatory warden Roy Dennis. Many of the techniques employed would ultimately be used again when the main project started in earnest on Rum in 1975. The attempt on Fair Isle, where the eagles had last nested in 1840, had potential in that the island had an abundance of prey, perfect habitat and a welcoming crofting community. The island is owned by the National Trust for Scotland, but the project was paid for by the RSPB and it resulted in the return of four young birds from Norway – two males and two females.

In September 1968 they were all released. One male vanished after a month. The others thrived and one by one started to explore further afield, but still often interacting with each other and finding their own food well away from the food dumps provided. As the others dispersed naturally, one

CHRIS GOMERSALL (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

A juvenile White-tailed Eagle on Mull in 1985, with a Hooded Crow in the foreground. The year holds significance as it marked the first successful breeding attempt for a century in the UK.

male remained on Fair Isle until the following summer. In August 1969, after catching one too many Northern Fulmars (a favourite prey), he succumbed after being spat at by the tubenoses on their ledges, with the oil clogging his feathers and eventually causing his demise. But the attempt showed potential. Nearly a year after release at least two eagles were probably still out there – somewhere – but the problem was that there just weren't enough birds. A more concerted effort, with a lot more eagles, would be required and soon work on that would begin.

BEN ANDREW (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

In recent years, projects to reintroduce White-tailed Eagles to other parts of Britain have gained traction. For example, an inaugural release of six birds occured on the Isle of Wight in 2019.

Rum punch

So many people were involved in the preparation for Phase One of the official White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction Project on the Isle of Rum – people who deserve credit for having the foresight and vision to make it a reality. As more than 50 years have now passed, some names may have slipped from our minds, but it's important to remember them. The main thrust for the project in 1974-75 came from what was then called the Nature Conservancy, which later became the Nature Conservancy Council and then Scottish Natural Heritage; today it is the Scottish government's wildlife agency, NatureScot. Key individuals who made it happen included Dr Ian Newton, Dr Derek Ratcliffe, John Morton-Boyd and Tony Colling in Edinburgh, and Martin Ball and Niall Campbell in Inverness. All worked together, continually encouraged of course by Roy Dennis, who by this time was working as Highland Officer for the RSPB. In Norway, where the donor chicks originated, Johan Willgohs and Harald Misund were critical to the success of the project in those early years. Back on Rum, John Love was the White-tailed Eagle Reintroduction Project Officer for the first 10 years, while the RSPB's Roger Broad and Colin Crooke played an integral role in monitoring the birds once they began to wander away from Rum.

Phase One ended in 1985 with some 82 chicks having been released. It culminated in the first successful breeding attempt, on the Isle of Mull, when the first wild White-tailed Eagle chick in the UK for perhaps a century flew from its nest. To have witnessed that special moment in UK conservation history with my colleagues Mike Madders and Keith Morton was another moment in my life that I remember as if it was yesterday. They were exhilarating, exhausting, stressful days, but ecstatic, wonderful times overall.

Phase Two began in Wester Ross in 1993; a further 58 chicks were released over the next five years, watched over by Kevin Duffy. Finally, Phase Three started in 2007 with a similar number released in Fife on the east coast of Scotland, under the care of Claire Smith, Rhian Evans and an army of volunteers. At the same time a successful project began in Ireland, managed by Allan Mee, that continues to this day. Without these additional release sites and the large number of birds involved, it's possible that the population might never have taken off and become the success it is today. With natural losses, man-made losses such as collisions with wind turbines and pylons, and the ongoing persecution of White-tailed Eagles and other raptors in parts of the UK, you have to get a lot of birds out there to make it work.

From our successful pair on Mull in 1985, we now have 23 pairs as part of the 200 or so that are found across Scotland. My predecessor on Mull, Richard Evans, played a huge role in achieving that success, while projects such as Mull Eagle Watch – that works with Forestry and Land Scotland, Police Scotland, volunteers and the Mull and Iona Community Trust – put Mull and sea eagles on the map as 'Eagle Island'.

A 50-year story of repair, resilience, and eagles
RETURN
RSPB
RSPB

***Return*, a documentary by the RSPB that celebrates the successful reintroduction of White-tailed Eagle to the UK, features rare footage and interviews with conservationists. It was released in late August 2025 and can be watched on the RSPB's YouTube channel.**

Scaling up

Roy Dennis is never going to ease up until White-tailed Eagle is rightly back in all its former haunts, so in 2019 the first releases took place for a project licensed by Natural England and NatureScot. Run by the Roy Dennis Wildlife Foundation and Forestry England, it used birds donated from Scotland for the first time, rather than Norway. Another lifetime highlight for me was being there to witness the first flights of those birds, including two chicks we'd collected from Mull. The were released into the dawn skies over the Isle of Wight, where the species had last bred in the 1700s.

In a podcast interview I tried to do with Tim Mackrill later that day, the emotion of that moment and all that had gone before it, including the friends I'd been with on this journey – some of them sadly no longer with us – proved too much and I was too choked up to continue. Tim gave me a moment, I gathered myself together, and on we went. What a day!

I'm sometimes asked what parts of my old job as RSPB Mull Officer I didn't like. It would have to be the wilful misrepresentation of basic White-tailed Eagle ecology and feeding behaviour by some in the Scottish livestock farming industry. These eagles are expert kleptoparasites – stealing fish from otters, making gannets cough up their mackerel catch, mugging Common Buzzards or Ospreys and grabbing their prey, and stealing lambs from other predators, in particular the corvids and large gulls. It's no secret that these other birds can inflict significant losses on lambs, but all too often it's the eagle that is blamed as it's big and tends to get noticed and photographed when feeding on or carrying a fresh lamb carcass. All too often people jump to the wrong conclusion. Of course, White-tailed and Golden Eagles may kill some lambs themselves, but the scale of blame now attributed to White-tailed Eagles is out of all proportion to reality and damages the credibility of the few genuine issues which might occur. It's this demonisation of the eagles by some individuals, their agencies and media – ignoring the science – which is the most disappointing and frustrating part of my work. However, working with others, the fight to stick with facts rather than fiction about White-tailed Eagles will continue.

CHRIS GOMERSALL (RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

The female White-tailed Eagle that formed part of the celebrated breeding pair on the Isle of Mull in 1985 – the first in the UK for a century. Nowadays, some 23 pairs of the raptor breed on the island.

The world has changed markedly in the last 50 years. Today we live in a UK where we stand a very good chance of once again seeing Red Kites, Ospreys, Eurasian Goshawks and White-tailed Eagles when not so long ago they had all been persecuted to near or actual extinction. Despite the problems that persist, we can celebrate that fact and in particular wish the eagles every success for the next 50 years. With further projects under discussion for Exmoor, Wales and north-west England, the birds will surely reoccupy much of their former range during that time frame. For the next generation and all young birders out there, the echoing call of the 'eagle with the sunlit eye' will be heard from the south coast of England to the far northerly tip of Shetland. The sea eagle is home for good. ■

DAVE SEXTON

The author, pictured here, was Head of the RSPB's Nature Reserves Department in Scotland before he moved to the Isle of Mull as Mull Officer in 2003.

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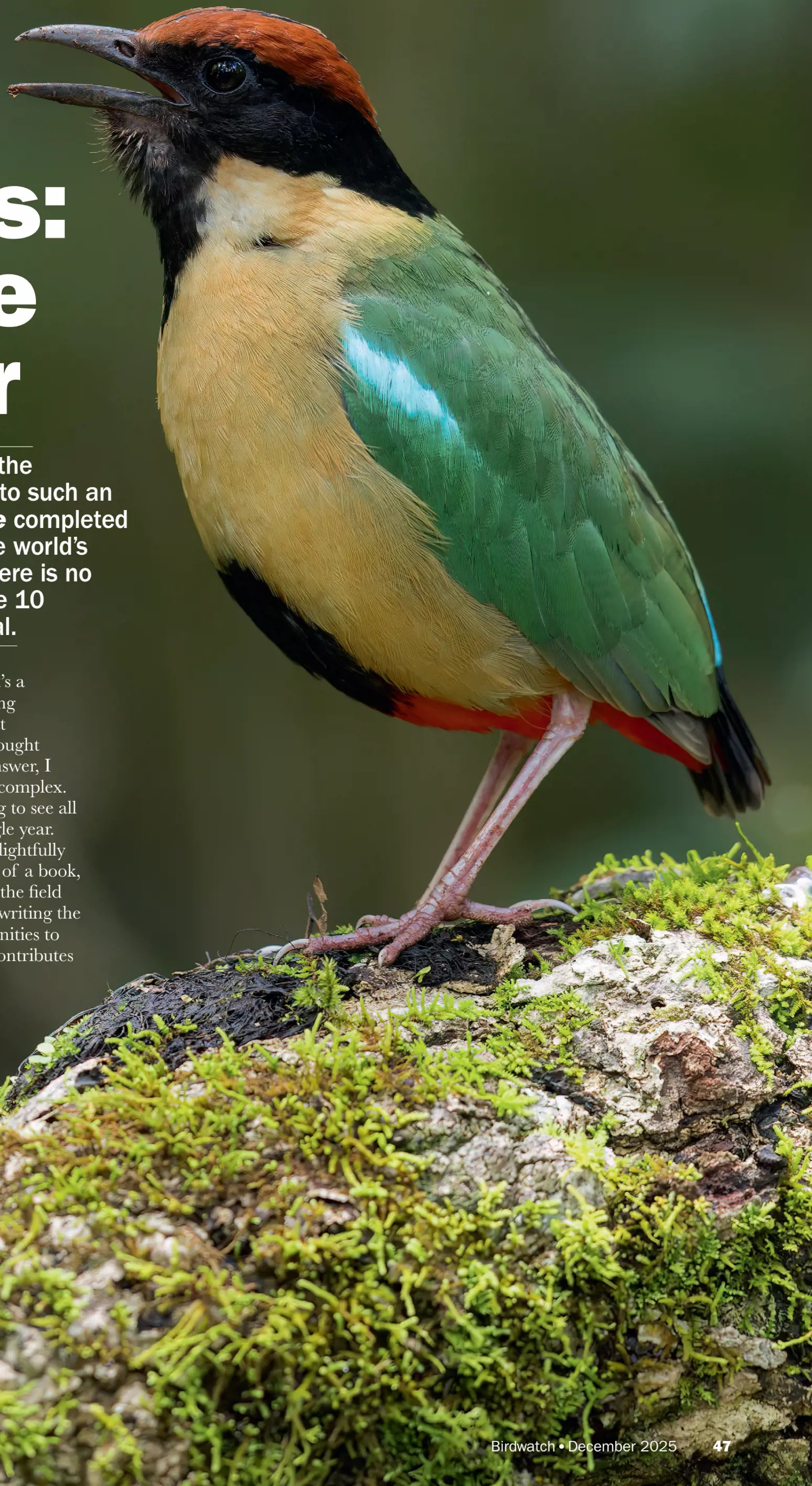


Noisy Pitta is a colourful species found in rainforests along the east coast of Australia and in southern New Guinea. Though shy, its loud call is distinctive.

GLENN BARTLEY (AGAMI.NL)

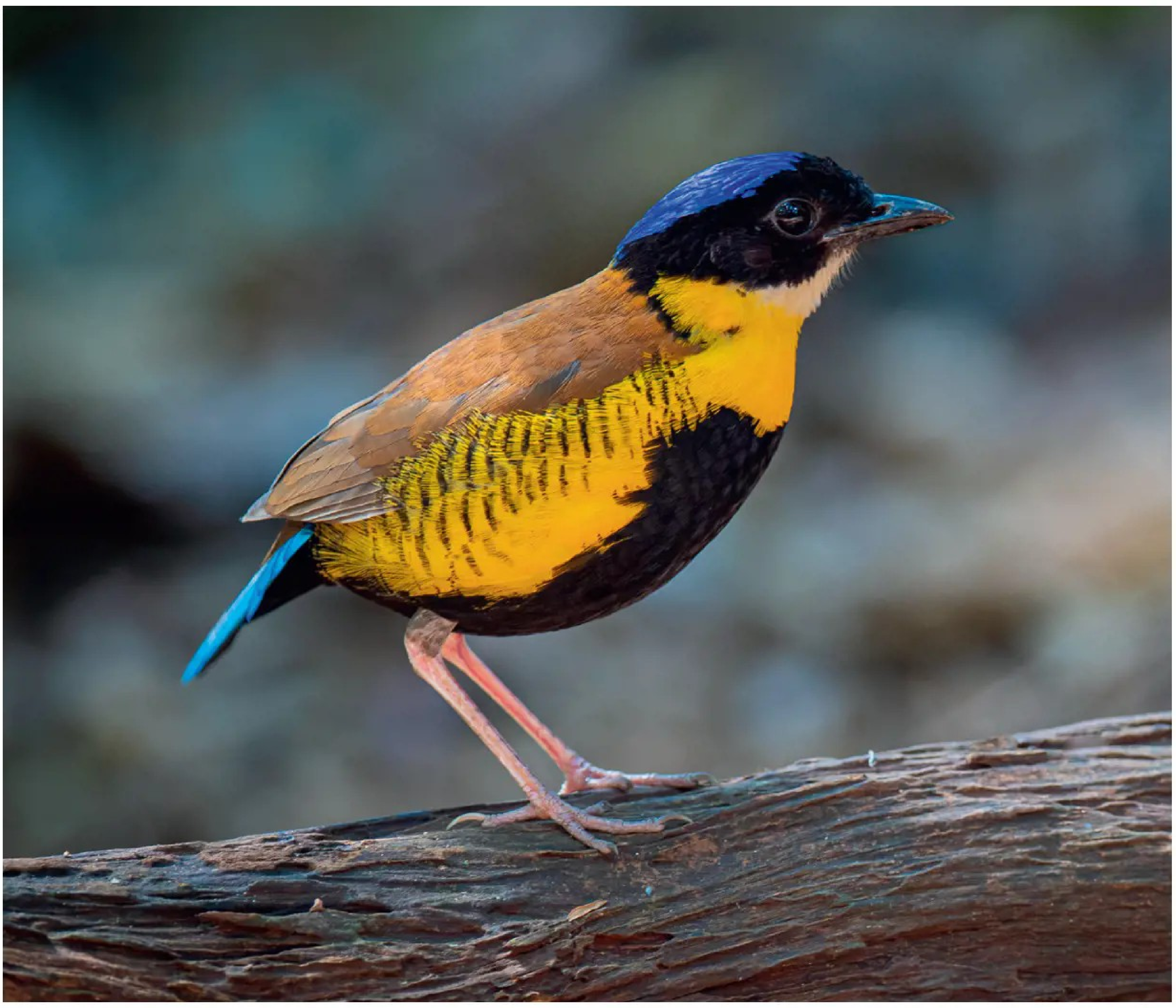
Pittas: a love affair

Why do pittas capture the imagination of birders to such an extent? ***Chris Gooddie*** completed a mission to see all the world's species in a year, so there is no better person to outline 10 reasons for their appeal.

Why do we love pittas? It's a question that I have long pondered, and one that numerous commentators have sought to answer over the years. The answer, I think, is both multi-faceted and complex. In 2009 I spent 12 months trying to see all the world's pitta species in a single year. The story of that lunatic and delightfully arcane mission formed the basis of a book, *The Jewel Hunter,* and my year in the field and the following months spent writing the book gave me plenty of opportunities to consider exactly what it is that contributes to the enduring appeal of pittas.

It's fair to say that I have been more completely smitten by pittas than most. Having decided to spend a year in pursuit of them, I set fire to a carefully constructed career ladder before warming my hands over the flames and swapping North London safety for South-East Asian peril. That chase cost me tens of thousands of pounds, seven kilos in weight and a large part of my sanity. I contracted dysentery, narrowly avoided the attentions of several venomous snakes and had to sprint away from the clutches of a ravenous Sun Bear that had chosen to share a Sumatran forest trail with me. I ran out of petrol on a small boat in the waters off the island of Manus, north of New Guinea, and had a few near misses on any number of *ojeks* (rented motorcycles). Most alarmingly, having lost all my luggage en route to Manus, I had to parade around the trails in a pair of counterfeit Manchester United shorts; oh the shame of it.

But what precisely is it that is so addictive about pittas; what is the essence of their allure? Here are 10 reasons why I believe we remain hopelessly in thrall to them. I have structured these factors as a list in the hope that it will help all readers to feel at home. We are among friends here, we are birders; and every birder loves a list.

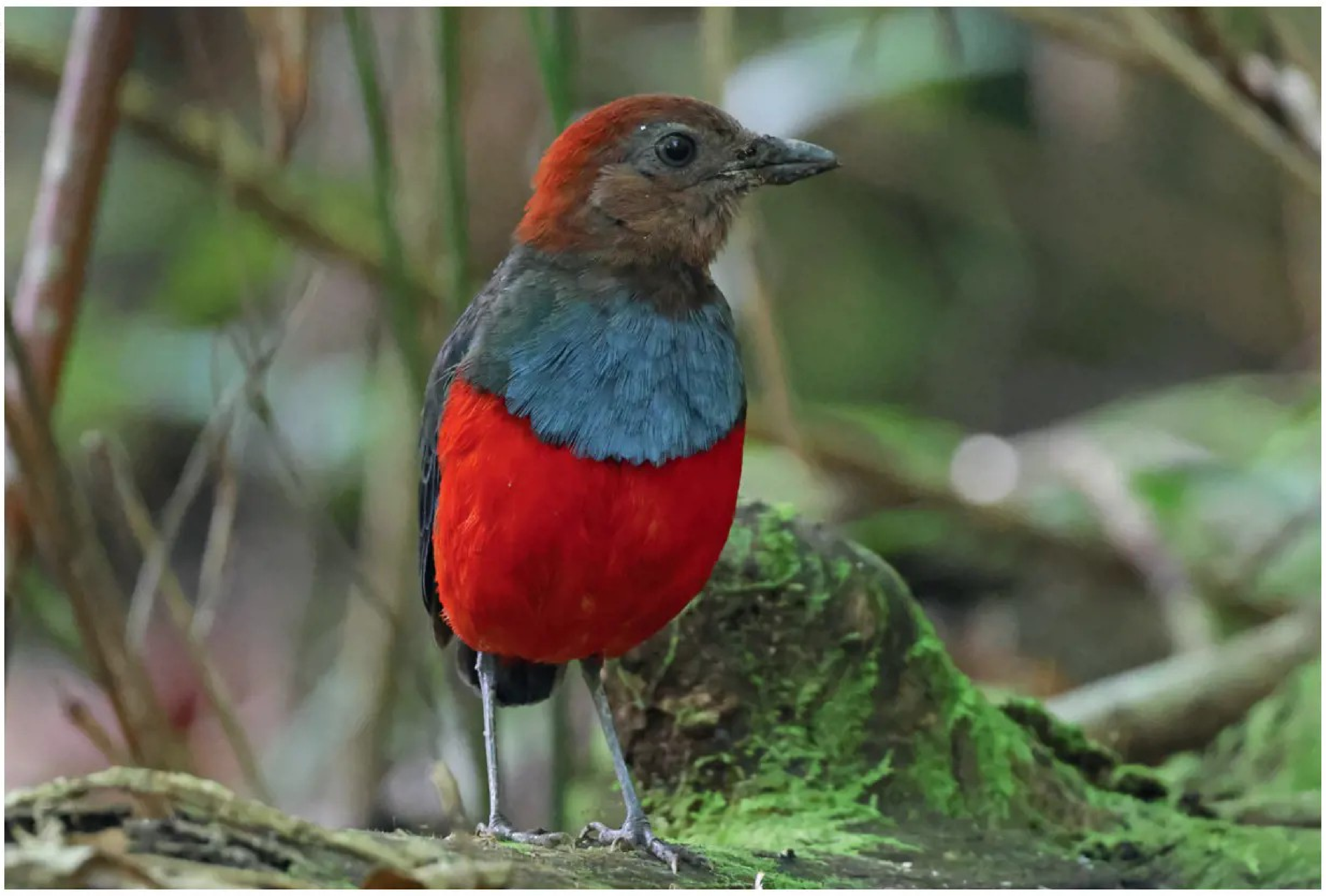

SUVAT CHAPANG (SHUTTERSTOCK.COM)

Gurney's Pitta is listed as Critically Endangered and is functionally extinct in Thailand, now surviving only in fragmented lowland forests in southern Myanmar. It is one of the most sought-after birds in the world due to both its extreme rarity and striking plumage.

1. Bright colours

Call me shallow, but this is a great place to start when rating any bird family. When a rare ray of light manages to penetrate the gloom of a pitta's rainforest home and illuminate a careless individual, it positively glows. Catch a pitta in a patch of sunlight and it emphatically explodes into luminescent colour. Often the first glimpse you get of a recalcitrant pitta is when it moves from the ground to the mid-storey, and an azure-blue wing-covert sparks in the penumbra like a flint striking a stone.

All bar one of the species feature iridescence in their plumage, which they use to attract mates and to temporarily startle and thus evade predators. Eared Pitta is the exception, although it is beautiful in its own subdued way and possesses, lest we forget, a fine pair of silvery ear tufts. It was nonetheless unarguably at the end of the queue when pitta colours were being handed out.


CHRIS GOODDIE

Formerly considered a subspecies of 'Red-bellied Pitta', genetic and morphological studies have elevated North Moluccan Pitta to a full species. It is endemic to the North Maluku Islands of Indonesia, where it is found across several isles including Halmahera, Ternate, Morotai and Obi.

2. Rarity value

Many species have been seen only by a very few dedicated people. Exclusivity is a big draw in all areas of life. Each pitta is a 'Limited Edition'. For the most part they reside in inconveniently far-flung places, often restricted to just a few isolated and inaccessible islands, where they typically inhabit the most dense and least hospitable areas of primary forest. Up-to-date news of their whereabouts can help, but sightings of the rarer species may be interspersed with gaps of months or even years. And it's not like they will necessarily stay put; shock news, pittas move around over time.

3. Elusive nature

Across the family, species share a near-uniform elusiveness. True, there are a couple of species – Rainbow and Indian Pittas spring to mind – that can at times quickly give themselves up in a frankly reprehensible way. I have heard such individuals described as being 'a disgrace to the tribe.' There's no doubt about it – if a bird leads you a merry dance and evades your best attentions for hours, weeks or even years, when you do finally manage to catch a glimpse, the endorphin pay-off will be correspondingly greater. Who has not enjoyed a moment of euphoria when a bogey bird is finally laid to rest?

4. Earth connection

Pittas live on the forest floor, down in the dirt. These shining avian gems must be dug out from the darkest forest corners, plucked from the very bowels of the earth and brought out into the light. Emerging from the forest after a successful encounter, there is without doubt the sense of having returned with long-buried treasure, at having unearthed a thing that has never been presented for human delectation before.

5. From another dimension

These birds inhabit a different dimension compared to us mere humans. I used to wonder how it was that a Rusty-naped Pitta knew when I was about to set eyes on it, and at that exact moment, reversed its trajectory. How could Malayan Banded Pittas remain so steadfastly invisible, when I could hear them tantalisingly just out of reach around every forest corner? How could a Blue-rumped Pitta be there one moment, and the next simply evaporate into thin air? I have described them in the past as "being able to take the subway, or glide through the forest without touching the floor. Despite their typically rather chubby frames, they are able to flatten themselves behind single blades of grass. They can travel through space-time without leaving a ripple in the continuum in a way that even Stephen Hawking could not begin to explain … they are shape-shifters, chimeric despite their heft, born of the earth and yet somehow not of it. If you are lucky to see a pitta on a song-post a few feet off the ground, enjoy it while you can. Chances are you will never see it once it hits the floor. A twitch of the magician's cloak and they are gone."

CHRIS GOODDIE

Rainbow Pitta is a small, colourful and elusive pitta that is endemic to the far north of Australia. Unlike many of its relatives in South-East Asia, this species is not considered threatened and thus is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN. It favours tropical monsoon forests.

JAMES EATON

The Elegant Pitta complex is endemic to Indonesia and East Timor. In 2020, research based on bioacoustic and morphological evidence split the species into three – Temminck's Elegant Pitta, Wallace's Elegant Pitta and Banda Elegant Pitta – a treatment adopted by some authorities.

6. Hunter's instinct

Pursuing pittas satisfies the primordial human urge to hunt. As I wrote during my 'pitta year', "Birding is basically pacifist hunting, and there is, after all, little fun in hunting if the animal in question trots up to you and lies at your feet." Pitta rainforest habitat is usually hot, sticky, prone to torrential downpours and packed with flora and fauna which are 100% incompatible with human comfort. Things get in the way – put simply there are way too many damn trees, behind any one of which a pitta may choose to secrete itself. And should the pitta see you before you see it, the game is up. They will sneak silently away before you have a chance to clock even a single feather on their sneaky, unco-operative behinds. But therein lies one part of the attraction: it is a hunt. You must see the prey before it sees you. Having located them, you must remain hidden while you try to secure your digital kill; a photograph for posterity (and so that your friends will believe you). And all of this must be done while leeches are attaching themselves to your lower limbs and mosquitos are sucking what little blood the leeches have left untapped. And you must do all of this moving in slow motion, or preferably not at all. It's a primitive thrill; does the hunter win, or does the game?

7. The 'bounce'

Pittas bounce. Often at speed. If there was a *Strictly Come Dancing* for birds, the pittas would walk off with the golden glitterball after a breathtaking spacehopper routine. You can keep your stately-stalk herons, your steady-gait pipits. Give me a high-octane ball of energy careening across the forest floor every time. Imagine you are sat on a trail in Vietnam duelling with a Bar-bellied Pitta. The pitta, as usual, is winning, and you have seen nothing beyond some kind of local rat and an unnervingly large ant. Bar-bellieds should be easy to see, adorned as they are in a fetching set of lime green, yellow and black tiger stripes and with a dashing royal blue belly. But they use the karst limestone cover so cunningly and move across the forest floor at such a rate, that if you catch a hint of movement and raise your binoculars you will already have missed them. The trick is to figure out the direction of travel, pan ahead to find a tiny gap, and then watch that space; anticipation will secure the victory – although usually only at the 15th attempt.

DUBI SHAPIRO (AGAMI.NL)

The recently split Bornean Banded Pitta is endemic to Borneo, where it primarily inhabits lowland and hill forests, favouring dry ridges, hilltops and limestone areas throughout the island. It was formerly considered conspecific with Javan and Malayan Banded Pittas.

8. Varied songs

Pittas have short, distinctive territorial songs that are easy to remember. Every year I have to relearn the difference between Blackcap and Garden Warbler. Now that I've been birding a fair few years I think I've got it down, but they are frustratingly similar. Not so your pitta songs. Bar-bellied Pitta? A squeaky toy being trodden on. Black-faced Pitta? A small dinosaur that's smoked 60 cigarettes a day for 30 years. The 'Red-bellied Pitta' group: asthmatic chickens, all. Giant Pitta? A sad, lost ghost. Once heard, never forgotten.

9. They remain enigmatic

So little is known about most members of the family. You can essentially file every aspect of pittas' behaviour under 'data deficient'. Which means that when you do eventually succeed in observing some tiny nugget of pitta behaviour – after expending inordinate effort – you can write it up in the certainty that it will add to the sum total of knowledge about the bird. A few years ago I had the misfortune to get alarmingly sick in Sumba, one of the main islands in Indonesia's Lesser Sundas archipelago. The upside was that I had time to spend long periods sitting still in forest while recuperating, and was fortunate enough to witness a pair of Elegant Pittas in a territorial dispute. After the birds had settled their differences and departed, I collected the remnants of snail shells that, in the manner of a Song Thrush, had been bashed on the dominant pitta's stone 'anvil'. With expert help I was able to identify two of the snails as *Asperitas bimaensis* and an *Amphidromus* species. On looking up the diet of Elegant Pitta in Frank Lambert's seminal *Pittas, Broadbills and Asities* monograph, I was gratified to read: 'FOOD: Nothing is recorded about the diet of this species.'

Cryptic species are still coming to light; 'Red-bellied Pitta', for so long considered a single, widespread polytypic taxon, was recently split no less than 17 ways – yes 17, although sanity has since prevailed and AviList now treats the group as a mere eight species. In similar fashion, 'Banded Pitta' has gone from one species to three and 'Hooded Pitta' has recently been the subject of a five-way split. Our understanding of the family is still evolving, and any and every observation of pitta minutiae gives you a shot at scientific immortality.

CHRIS GOODDIE

The striking Ivory-breasted Pitta is one of the largest pitta species in the world, measuring between 25-28 cm in length. It is endemic to several islands in the North Moluccas.

10. The challenge

Like us, pittas relish a challenge. Almost without exception they are heard before they are seen. What follows next is an extended and complex dance. It is both a physical and a mental duel, a fencing match meeting a game of chess, thrust met by parry, move followed by countermove. It's unpredictable, and is always a thrill as the drama unfolds. Add to that their Garbo-esque 'I want to be alone' attitude, their disrespect for birders' authority and their sheer bloody-mindedness and you have a recipe for a right old ding-dong. Bring it on! ■

Find out more

Chris Gooddie lives in North Norfolk. His wife remains less keen on pittas than he does. His book, *The Jewel Hunter*, is available as an ebook from: **press.princeton.edu/books/ebook/9781400847235/the-jewel-hunter-pdf**

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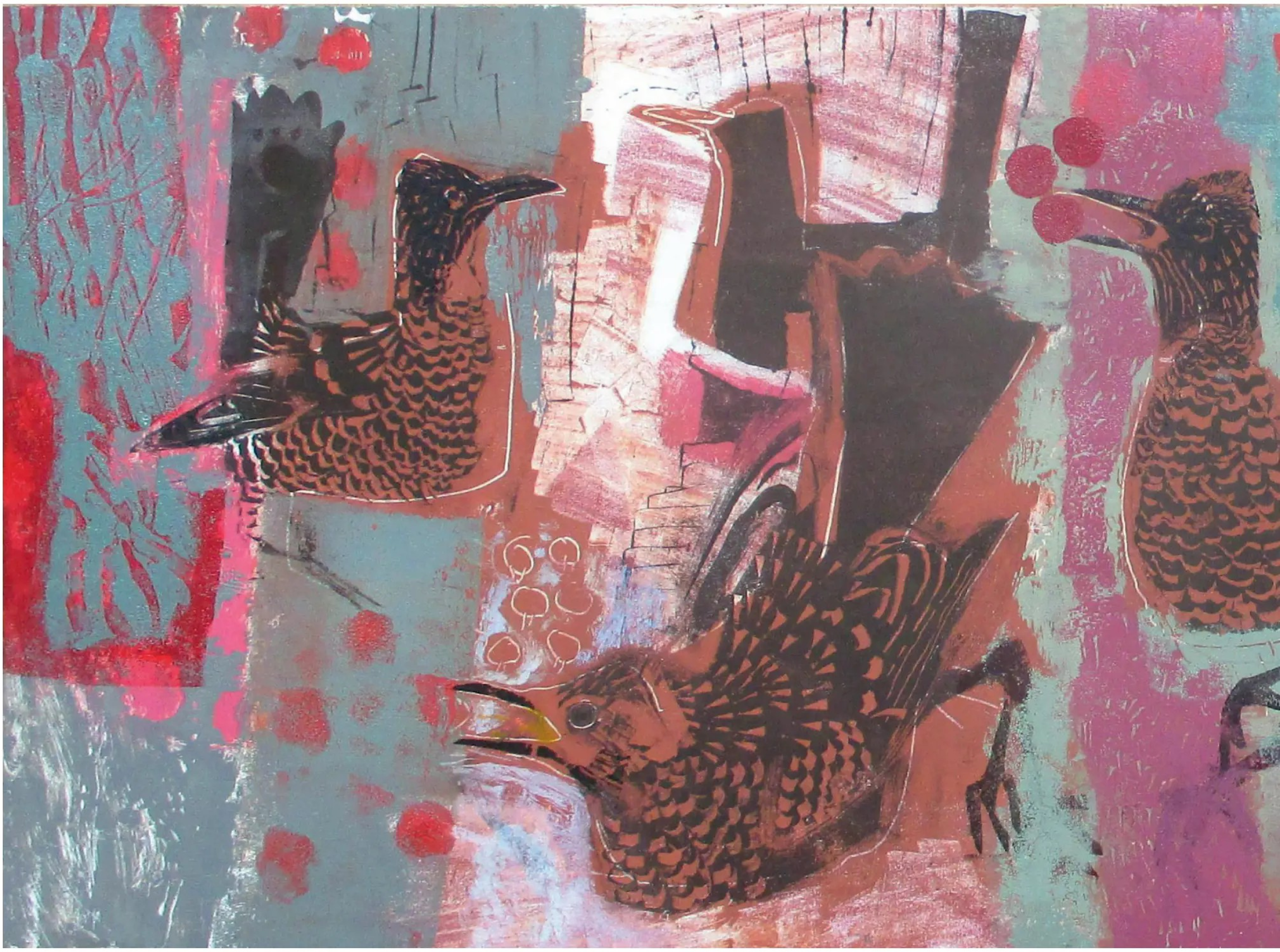

This wonderful world

The rich and diverse array of artworks on show at this year's *The Natural Eye* exhibition highlighted the elegant beauty of the natural world. *Josh Jones* reveals the winner of the 21st *Birdwatch* and SWAROVSKI OPTIK Artist of the Year award.

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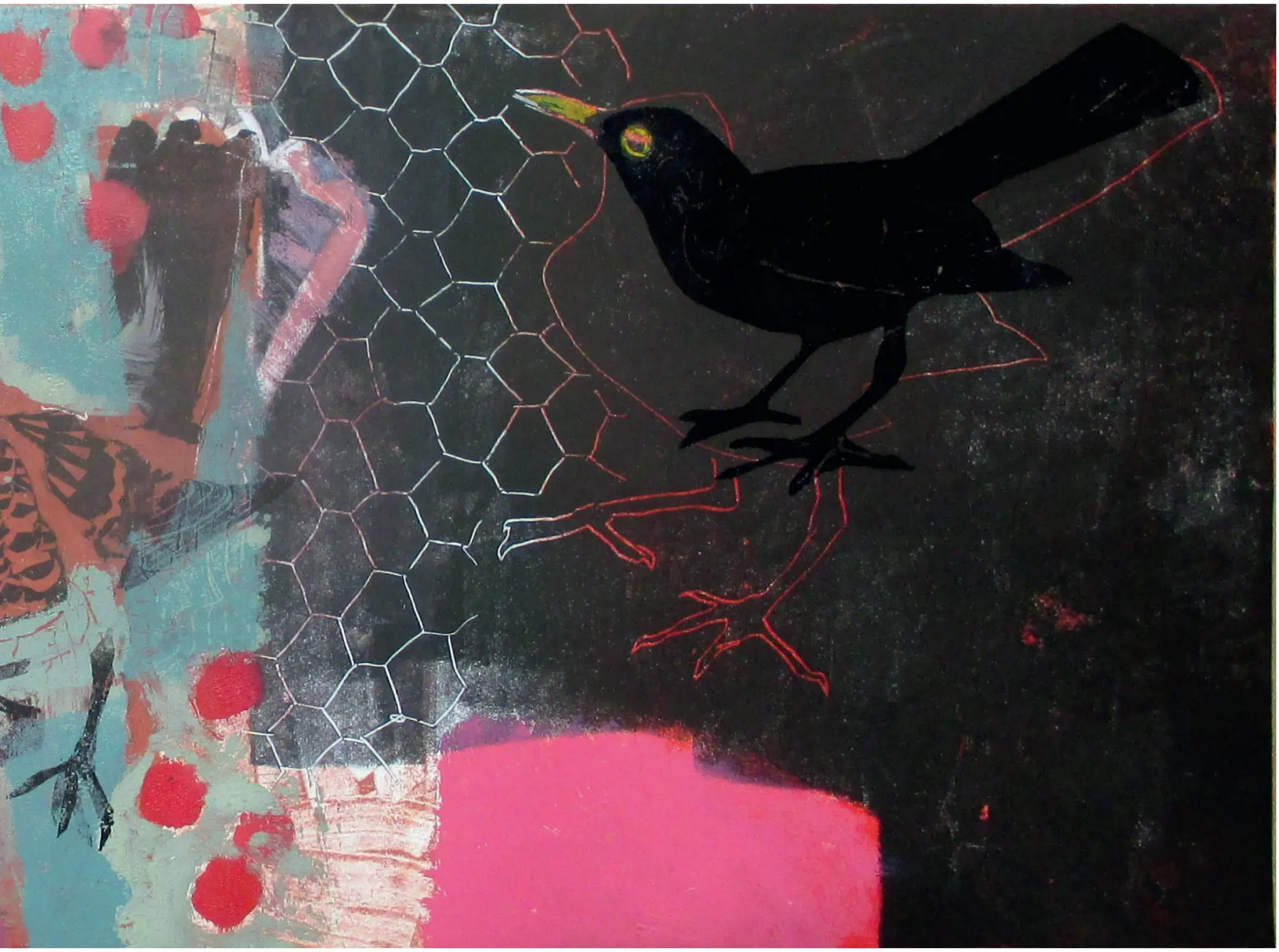
One of the highlights of the calendar is *The Natural Eye*, the highly acclaimed annual exhibition of the Society of Wildlife Artists (SWLA). Taking place every autumn, this showcase of the very best of wildlife art always promises to be a visual treat.

This year was no exception. Stepping into the front entrance of London's Mall Galleries, I was instantly transported from the grey of a cool autumn morning into a room awash with colour, movement and style. At first glance, it was immediately clear that this year's show had no shortage of delightful works to take in and choosing a winner of the highly prized *Birdwatch* and SWAROVSKI OPTIK Artist of the Year award wasn't going to be easy – albeit a nice challenge to have!

Linking up with SWAROVSKI OPTIK's Adam Randall and SWLA members Daniel Cole, Nik Pollard and Chris Rose, the judging commenced ahead of the afternoon's private view. This was the third year in which I've had the honour of joining the panel and it proved the be the lengthiest process yet, which is testament to the outstanding quality of the work on show. One-and-a-half hours' worth of deliberation and several laps of the gallery followed until, after much discussion, a winner was eventually decided upon.

This year's Artist of the Year award goes to Kim Atkinson SWLA for *Raspberry Thieves*, a bold and striking work which features a family of Blackbirds. While her art is often abstract, Kim is a brilliant field observer and, in this piece, she has beautifully captured the chaos as recently fledged Blackbird chicks are unleashed on her garden, as the male parent anxiously



Winner: ***Raspberry Thieves*** WINNER
by Kim Atkinson SWLA

Kim Atkinson has been an SWLA member since 1992 and her striking works will be familiar with many *Birdwatch* readers. Kim, who lives in north-west Wales, takes inspiration not only from the nearby coastline also from her wildlife-friendly garden, which is where this year's winning piece is set.

She said of *Raspberry Thieves*: "This year we had a bumper crop of Blackbird fledglings in the garden, with their patterns of scallops and darts and chuckling calls. After a few days of being fed worms they follow their parents' lead in plundering fruit. Redcurrants disappear first before they get stuck into the raspberries in the hen run.

"It was worth sacrificing the fruit, because I made paintings and this monoprint of them. Once I got into the studio, the thought of all that juice made the starting point of pinkness in the piece.

"All my work is based on hours of observation. It's going to be wonderful to make the most of this generous award from SWAROVSKI OPTIK."

Visit the Mall Galleries website for more details on the exhibition: **bit.ly/SWLABW25**

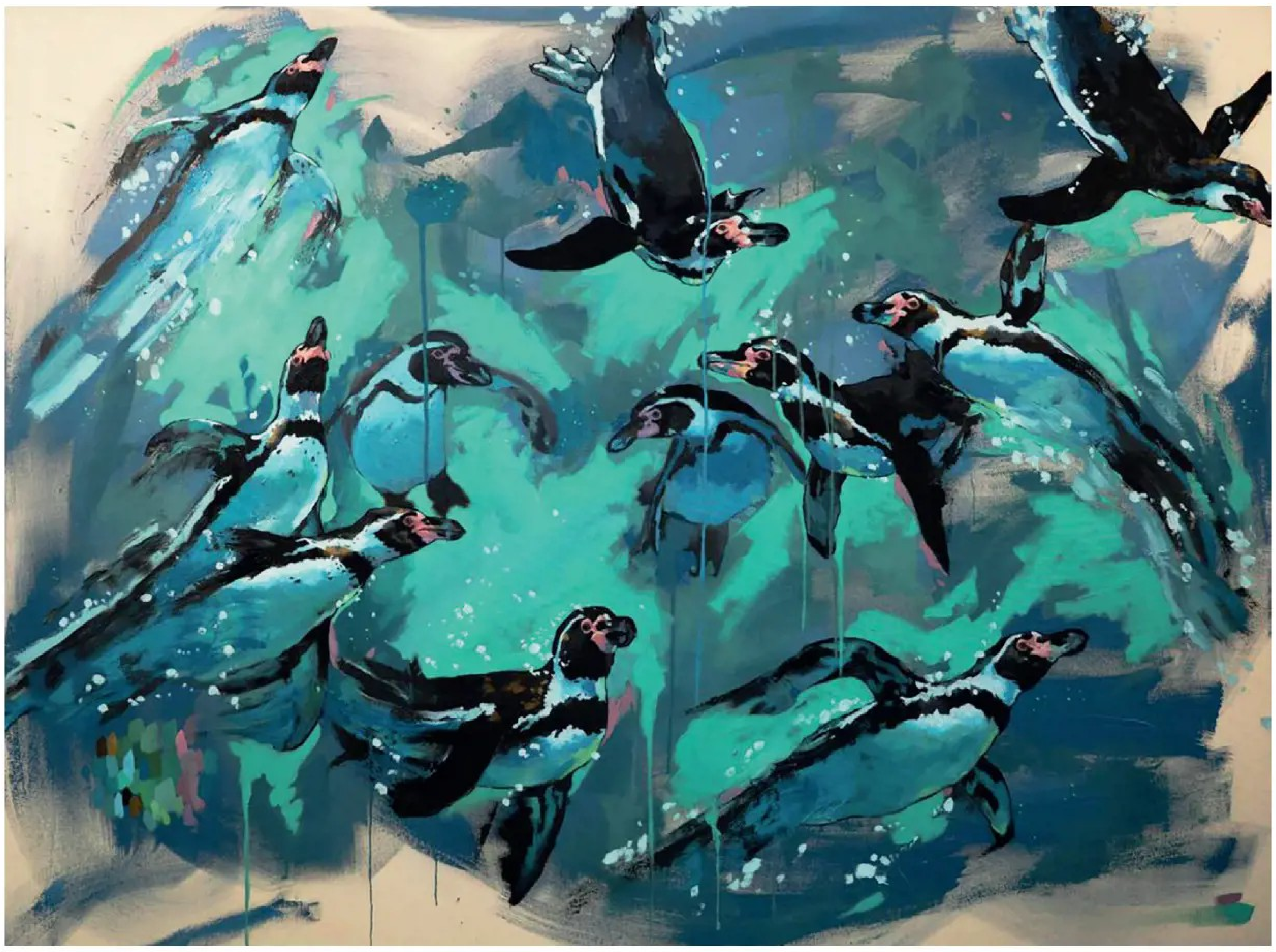
watches on. Kim wins a SWAROVSKI OPTIK ATS 80 HD telescope with a 25-50x zoom eyepiece and a three-year subscription to *Birdwatch* magazine.

Singer-songwriter David Gray, himself a passionate conservationist, was in attendance and gave a rousing and deeply thought-provoking speech after the awards ceremony. Gray perfectly encapsulated the appeal of art, stating "a painting, or a drawing, is a tribute to the bird, in the way a photograph commonly isn't."

Later, he emphasised the importance of creating wildlife art to inspire people to care about the natural world, saying: "What [an artist] gets at the end of the process of looking and rendering, as well as the representation of the animal itself, is also a kind of self-portrait. We have made a picture of our own sense of wonder [in the natural world]. I believe, in sowing the seeds of this sense of wonder, lies our greatest hope."

There was no shortage of wonder, inspiration and beguilement on show at *The Natural Eye* this year, not least the field sketches from SWLA's ongoing Massingham Heath Project, by the end of which in spring 2026 more than 30 members will have travelled to north-west Norfolk to document nature through the season in this rewilded landscape. The finished project promises to be very special indeed.

In the meantime, here we present the winning entry, the runner up and some of the other highly commended works from this year's exhibition, which ran from 16-25 October 2025 and has now closed to the public. However, all the exhibits in this year's spectacular collection can be viewed and purchased on the Mall Galleries website at **bit.ly/SWLABW25**. ■

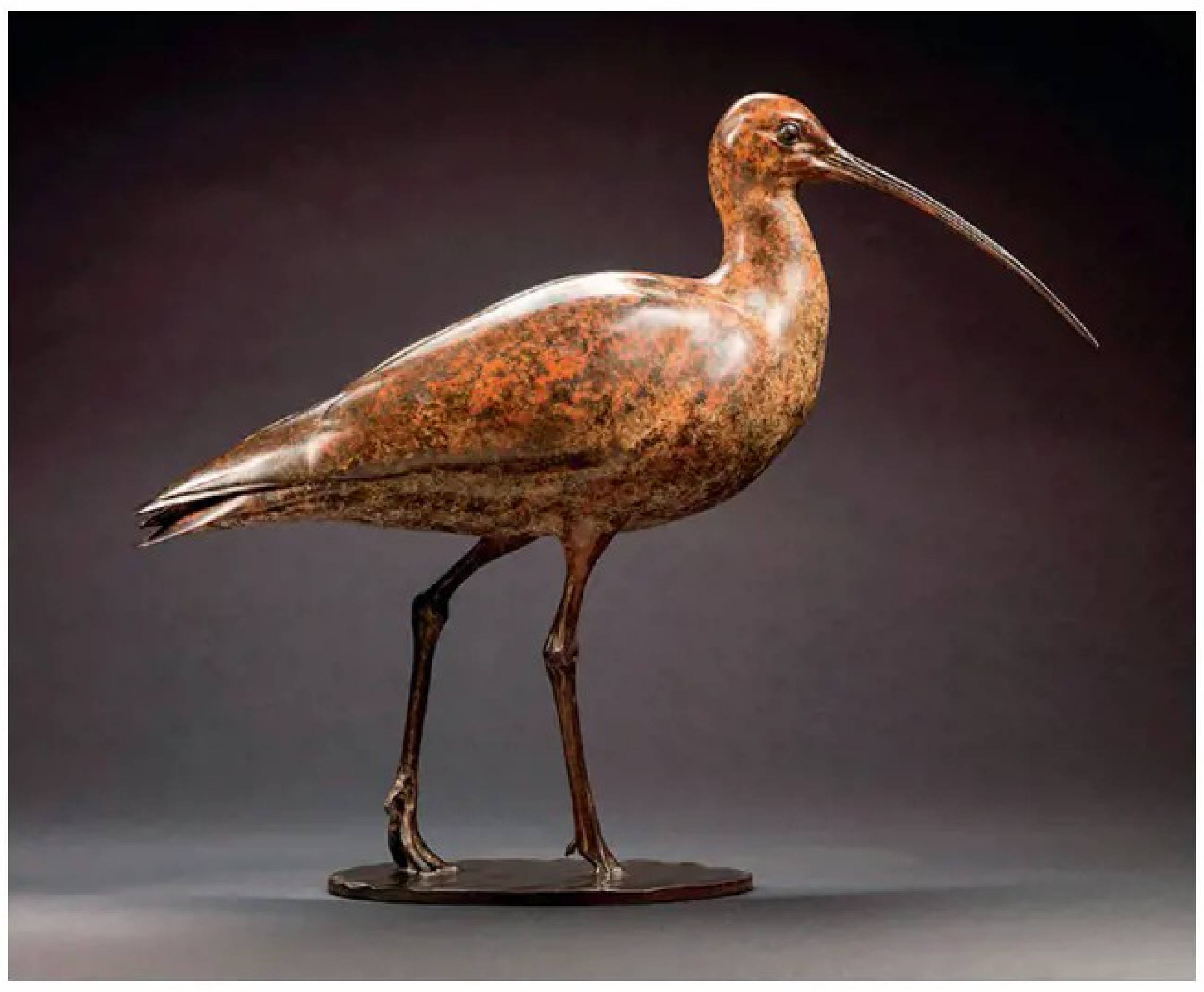


Runner up: *Enrichment* RUNNER-UP
by Lee Putman

One notable aspect of this year's exhibition was the impressive range of works on show from new and up-and-coming artists. One of the most eye-catching of these was Lee Putman's spectacular study of underwater Humboldt Penguins. In addition to its formidable (120 x 160 cm) dimensions, rendering it one of the exhibition's focal points, the judges felt that Lee's ability to capture depth and movement so effectively also helped to make this piece stand out.

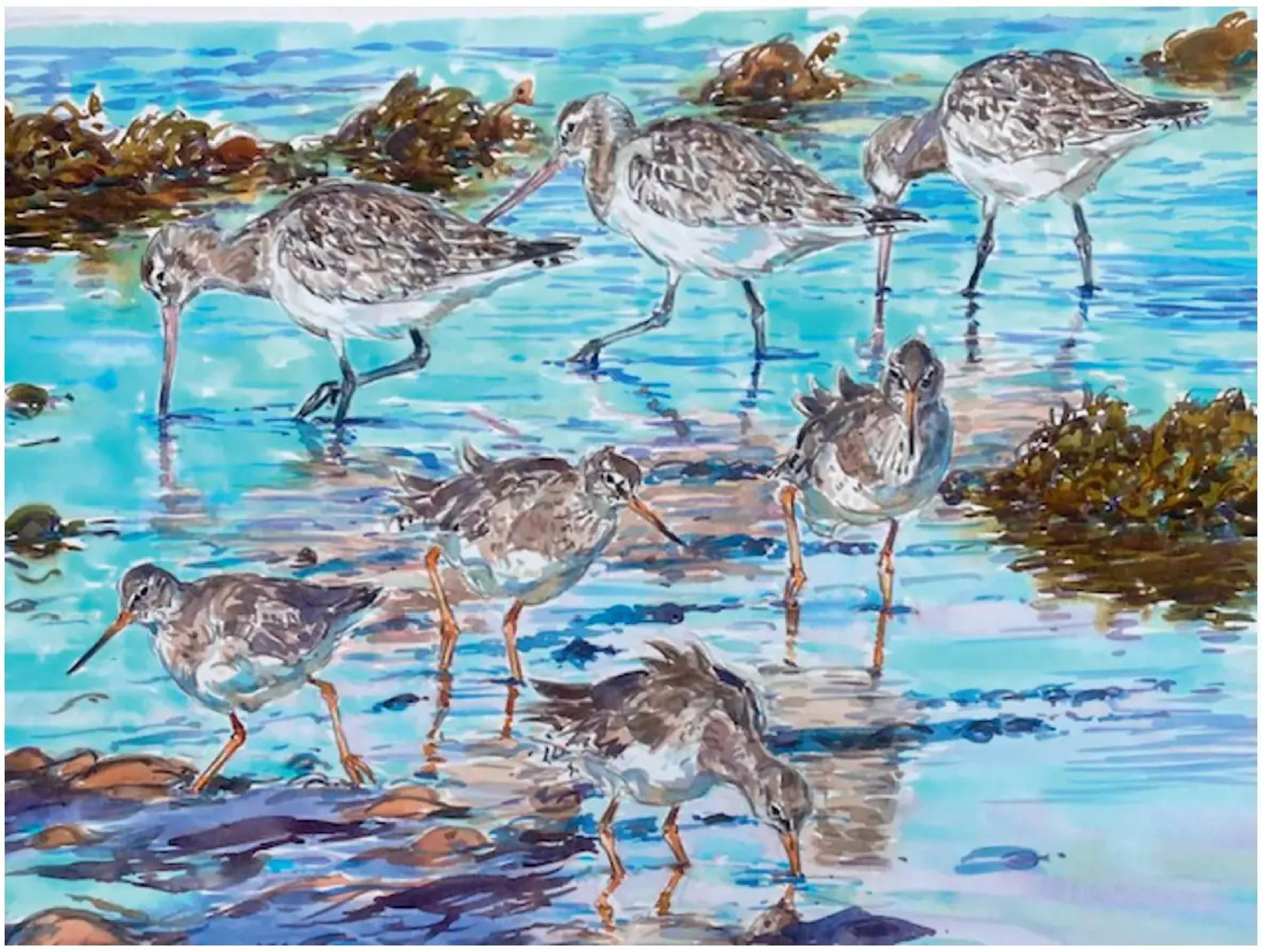
Bar-tailed Godwits and Redshank
by David Bennett SWLA

York-based David Bennett has a lively and elegant style that is instantly recognisable. Focusing on two shorebird species in this colourful piece, he has captured the birds' plumage and character with aplomb, despite the relatively loose brushstrokes.



Curlew
by Nick Bibby SWLA

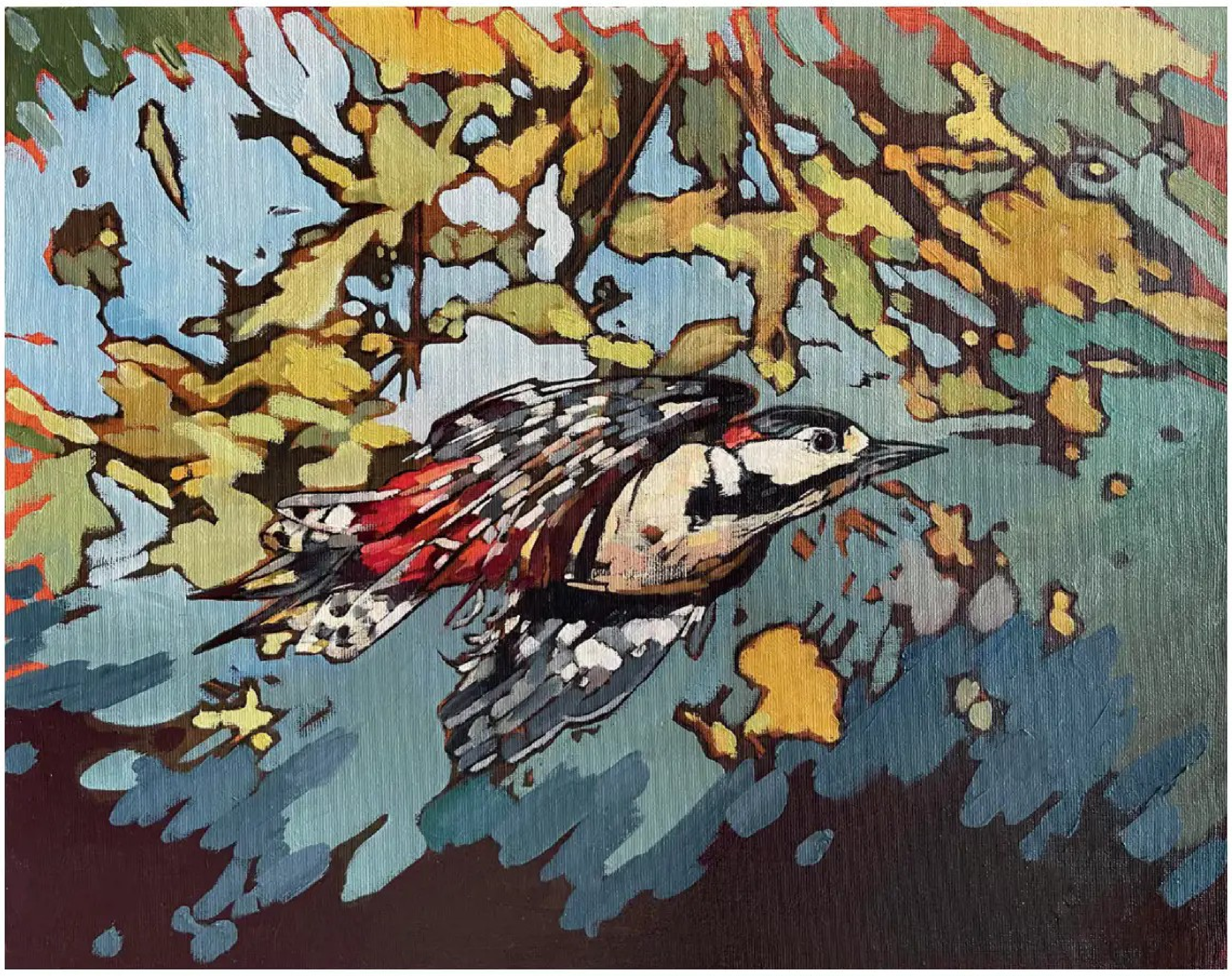
Nick Bibby's spectacular bronze sculpture of a Eurasian Curlew was well received by the entire panel, with the bird's proportions and jizz captured brilliantly. Most impressive was the way in which Nick has accurately sculpted the bird with its feet half-raised, conveying a sense of buoyancy and movement.



Society of Wildlife Artists
62nd Annual Exhibition
The Natural Eye 2025

JOSH JONES

A thought-provoking and impassioned speech was given at the awards ceremony by singer-songwriter David Gray, who is a keen wildlife enthusiast.



Great Spotted Woodpecker in flight
by Laura Andrew ASWLA

Laura Andrew's distinctive technique makes her work instantly recognisable on the Mall Galleries walls, with her use of rich colour and bold brushstrokes giving a 'stained-glass window' feel to many of her pictures. This delightful Great Spotted Woodpecker image wouldn't look out of place featuring in a church window somewhere.

S WL A Society of Wildlife Artists
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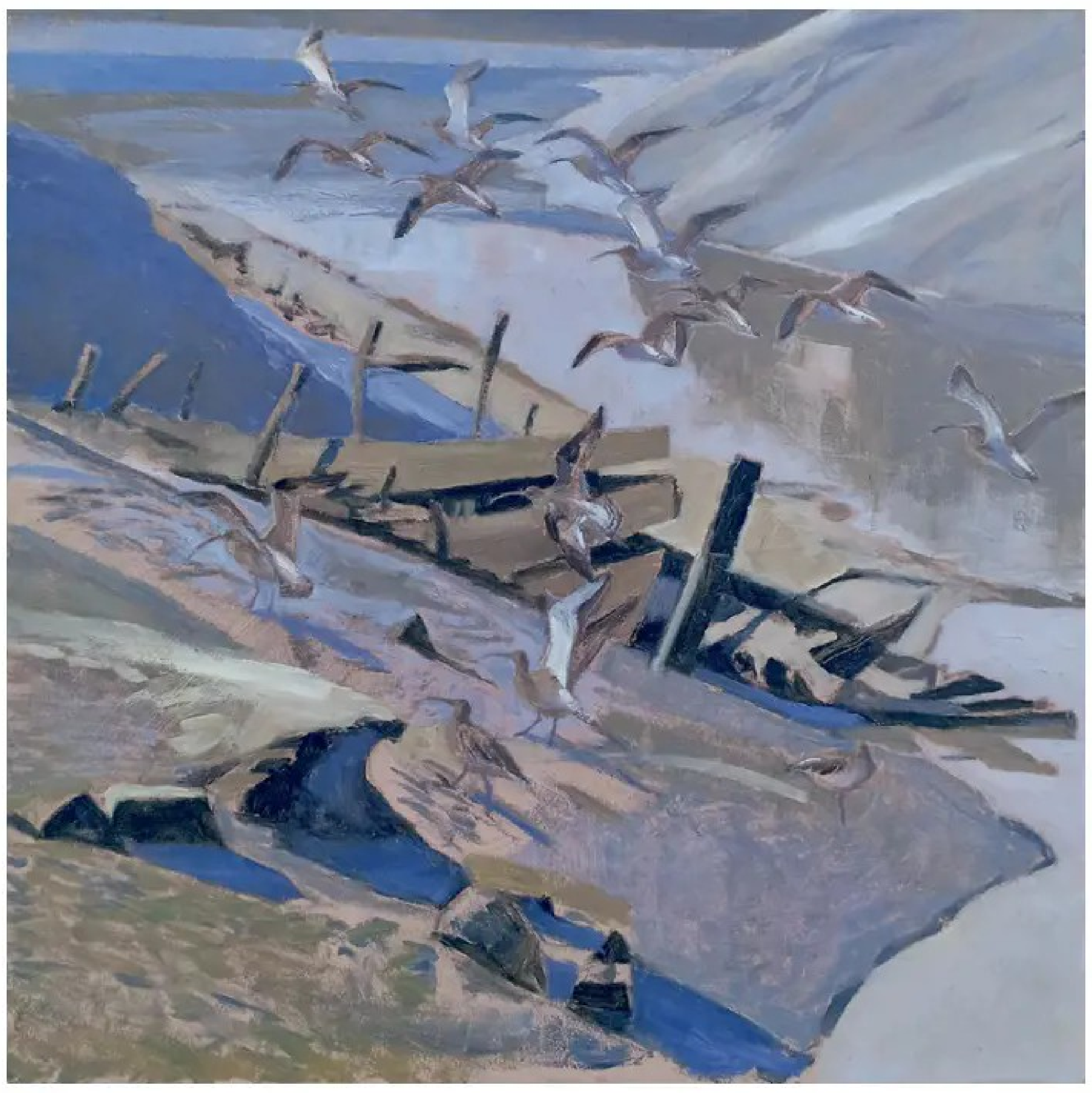
MALL GALLERIES

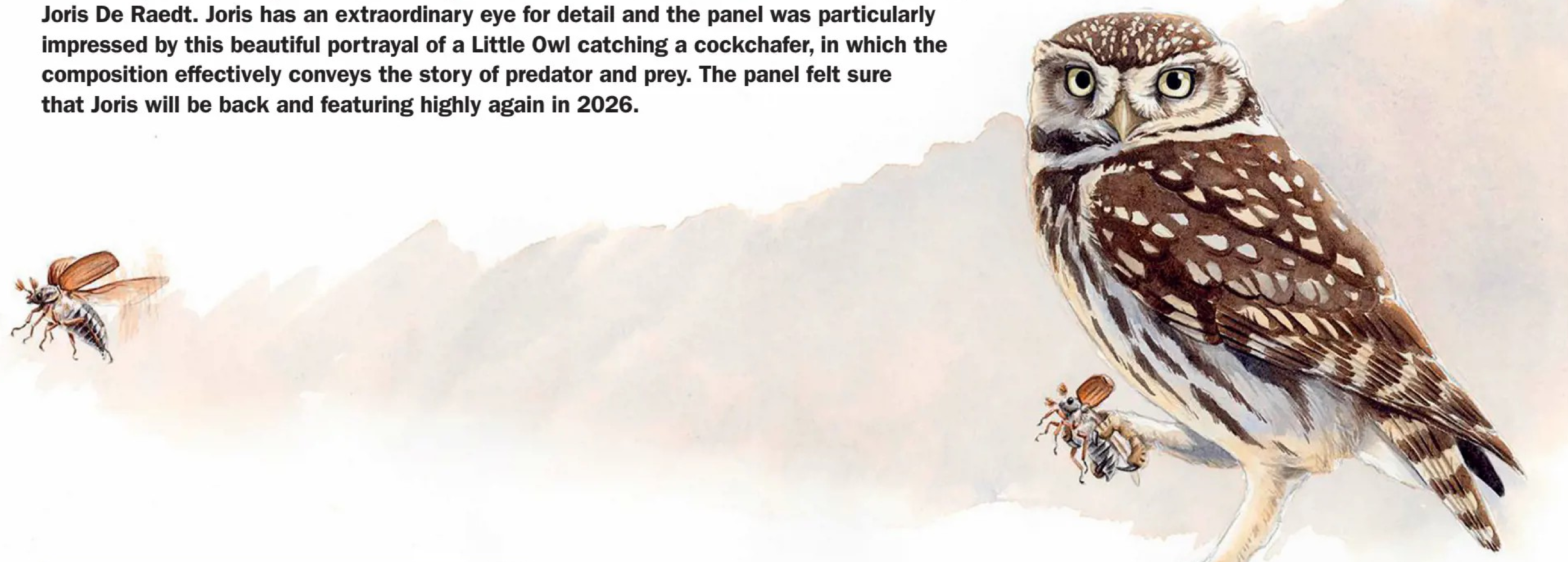
Curlew creek
by Robert Greenhalf SWLA

Robert Greenhalf is a name that needs no introduction. A titan of the wildlife-art scene, he has been an SWLA member since 1981 and has featured in a long list of shows, exhibitions and publications. Robert's work stems from field observation and the panel felt that *Curlew creek* epitomised this perfectly – it's very easy to imagine yourself on a North Norfolk coastal path, rounding a corner to see curlews taking flight from the mudflats up ahead.



Athene noctua
by Joris De Raedt ASWLA

Another up-and-coming exhibitor is Belgian scientific illustrator and natural-history artist, Joris De Raedt. Joris has an extraordinary eye for detail and the panel was particularly impressed by this beautiful portrayal of a Little Owl catching a cockchafer, in which the composition effectively conveys the story of predator and prey. The panel felt sure that Joris will be back and featuring highly again in 2026.



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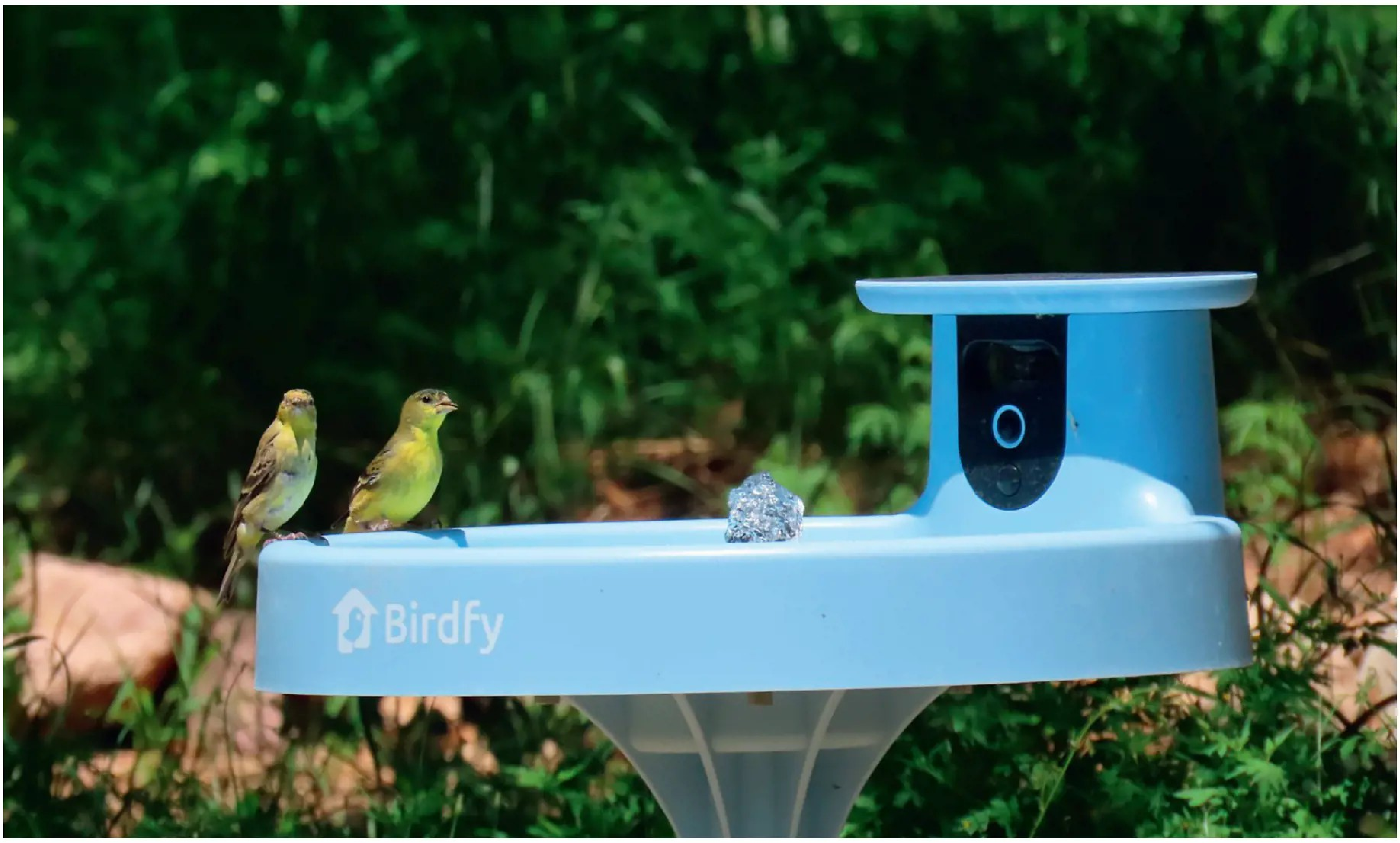
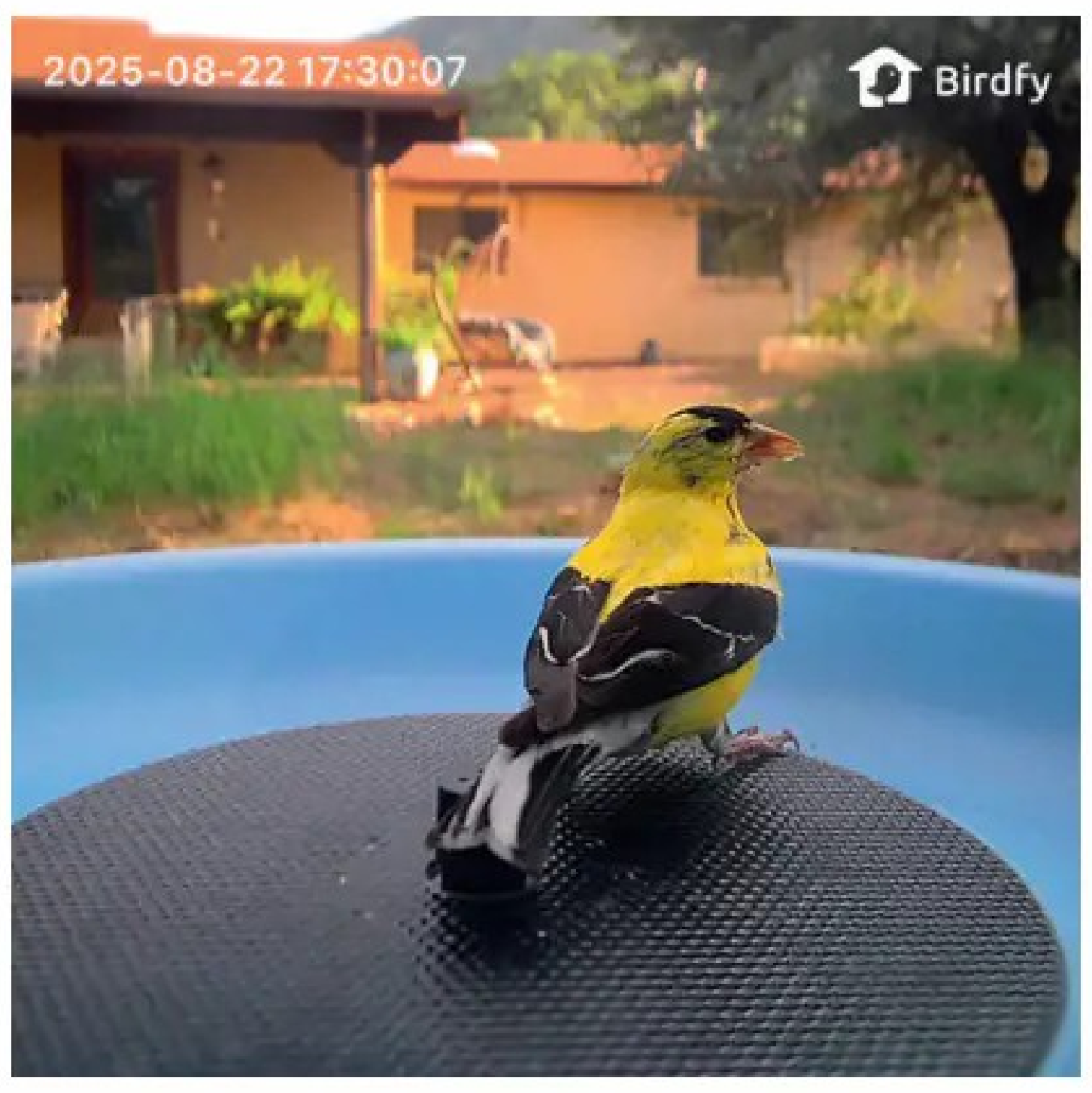
This month's panel: Keith Betton, Chris Harbard, Rob Hume and Josh Jones


CHRIS HARBARD

Bathtime bonanza

THE latest camera-based product from Birdfy is a magnificent bird bath featuring high-quality solar-powered cameras and a solar-powered fountain. Available in blue or off-white, it can be purchased with or without a stand. Like all Birdfy products, it is easy to assemble and is made from materials which are designed to withstand exposure to sunlight and UV radiation.

The bath is the perfect depth for bathing birds and they can also perch on the edge to drink. The fountain comes with several nozzles so you can choose what is most appropriate, while it also works without a nozzle. When windy, a high fountain spray can be blown out of the bird bath, which means the bath will quickly empty, so I favour using 'no nozzle', which keeps more water inside.



An integrated solar panel surrounds the fountain and acts as an additional perch for any bird wanting to drink or wash. Be aware that the fountain will soon stop after light ceases to fall on the central solar panel, so make sure you position it out in the open to get the best possible results for most of the day. The bath is easy to clean, with foam filters which remove feathers or anything else which might block the fountain. These are also easily cleanable and spares are provided. In places which have a high mineral content in the water, the cameras will need regular wiping to keep them clean. The base of the stand can be secured with rocks but I used metal pins in the ground (not supplied) as we experience gusty winds here in south-east Arizona and our dogs have a habit of playing with rocks!

The cameras have an IP66 waterproof rating to withstand any weather conditions, with both a wide-angle lens to capture a full image of the whole bath, and a smart portrait lens which zooms in to take a closer image of a bird wherever it is perched. Settings include a motion alert that tells you when the camera has detected a bird. As with other Birdfy cameras, it will stream to your WiFi if the bird bath is positioned close enough for a good signal. This means that, using the Birdfy app, you can watch bird action on the bath from wherever you are in the world, on your phone or other device. Free cloud storage means that video clips and still images can be downloaded later.

An optional AI feature boasts recognition of 6,000+ species. I have found it to be pretty good here with only a couple of errors, which can be reported to help the system learn. This is available by subscription or with one payment for a lifetime subscription. Water is a magnet for birds where I live and several species were immediately attracted to the bath. First came Lesser Goldfinches, joined by a rare American Goldfinch arriving for a drink. Plenty of other birds have been taking advantage, including Mexican Jay, White-winged Dove, House Finch and Western Tanager. It is great fun to be able to watch them bathing and I look forward to seeing what the set-up draws in next! ***Chris Harbard***

More info

- Product: Birdfy Bath Pro
- RRP: £279.99 (without stand); £319.99 (with stand).

County avifauna impresses

SMALL in size it may be, but Bedfordshire is a county that makes the birding headlines with impressive frequency. Indeed, despite being some 70 km from the sea at its closest point, this landlocked county nonetheless punches above its weight ornithologically year after year, producing an array of rare, scarce and locally significant records.

Much of this may be attributed to the diversity of habitats found within the county borders, with pockets of beechwood, fenland, river valleys, chalk-grassland outcrops and, significantly, artificial landscapes such as former clay and sand quarries in various stages of restoration.

Given that my 'home' area of Peterborough encompasses a similar range of environments and its local bird-club recording area is of equivalent size to Bedfordshire, it was with great interest that I opened the pages of Tony Ploszajski's recently published *The Birds of Bedfordshire*, an impressive coffee table-sized, 506-page hardback magnum opus detailing the county's avifauna.

What a fantastic piece of work this is! If you wanted to sell Bedfordshire to a sceptical birder potentially moving to the region, all you'd need to do is put a copy of his book in front of them. It's presented beautifully, decorated with superb photos – many of which have not been published online – and absolutely packed with information.

The meat of the book comprises the species accounts, which present detailed breakdowns of the status of every bird recorded in Bedfordshire. Focusing on the period 1990-2022, there is thorough analysis of the changes witnessed. Inevitably, there are losses: Wood Warbler, Willow Tit and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker are names that will ring true with many other counties nationwide, but there are also less 'obvious' inclusions (Ruddy Duck being one). However, it's not all doom and gloom, with other species having moved in during that time, such as Bearded Tit, Goosander and Eurasian Bittern.

I was impressed by how the accounts have been laid out, being easy to navigate. Some of the rarer visitors – Roseate Tern and Barred Warbler being a couple of examples – come with engaging finder's accounts, while Bill Oddie's report of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo in December 1990 is something I can imagine still grips off county listers to this day.

It was interesting to read of the decline in annual Black Tern numbers primarily due to a drop-off in autumn numbers (something that seems the same around me), and indeed sad to see the precipitous drop in large gull numbers in the county since the closure of its landfill sights – neither Glaucous nor Iceland Gull has occurred in the county since 2014. There is also a multitude of interesting snippets for the reader to get their teeth into, such as a Common Pochard ringed in Bedfordshire in 1985 that was shot 7,000 km away in Russia seven years later. There are also some great profiles of the county's top birding sites, which help to give context and insight into Bedfordshire birding.

Ending in 2022, of course, is the issue with printed works – they quickly become outdated. There are, however, appendices listing significant county records for 2023 and 2024, meaning this book is as up-to-date as it could be. It should be said that this cut-off does not detract from the overall excellent quality of the publication and the immense amount of work that has gone into its production.

All profits from sales of this delightful book will support Wildlife BCN's Strawberry Hill rewilding project and The Greensand Trust's Clophill Lakes reserve, which is a very good excuse to invest in a copy (if it were needed).

Josh Jones

The Birds
of Bedfordshire
Tony Ploszajski

More info

- *The Birds of Bedfordshire* by Tony Ploszajski (BNHS, 2025).
- 506 pages, 399 photos.
- ISBN: 9781916241718. Hbk, £45 introductory price until 31 December 2025.

Scan the QR code for more details or to purchase a copy.

Remote havens

DESPITE the subtitle mentioning seabirds this is a book predominantly about islands, with 46 chapters of varying lengths about islets worldwide. Many are visited as 'stepping stones' on the way out to take part in various seabird research projects, with birds scarcely mentioned in some cases, if at all.

All islands treated are described from the author's own experiences and sharp observation, having visited some places only once but others many times. The chapters deal with history, historic sites, the people, their lifestyles and food, their dogs and livestock, and their outlook on life in these often-remote places. We hear how the author travelled, what he ate and even how he survived some extreme adventures.

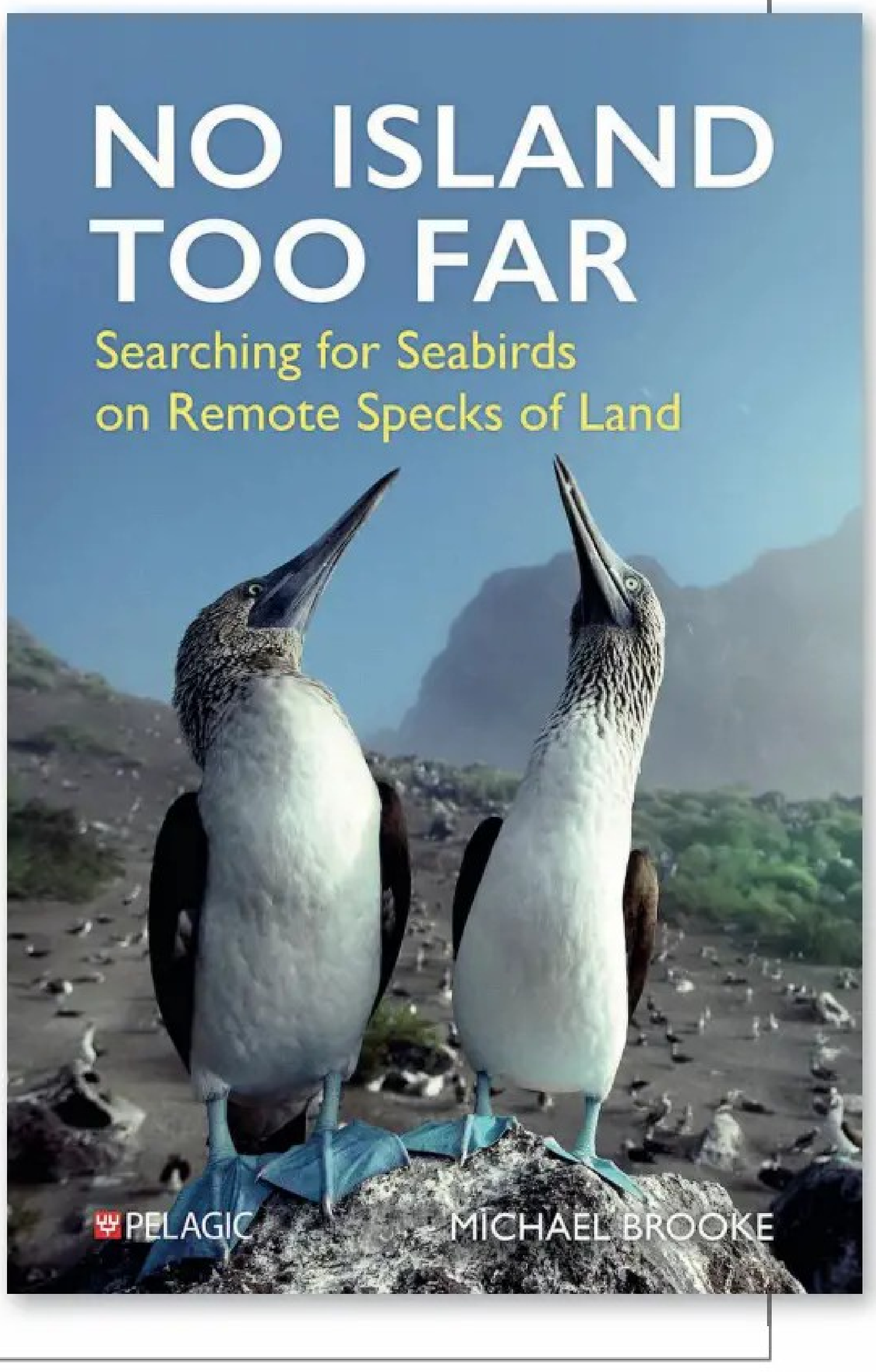
But then, in many cases, the birds come to the fore – and often in abundance. Razorbills, Guillemots and Puffins, gannets, shearwaters, petrels, albatrosses, finches, larks, kiwis … the list goes on. With the addition of the seemingly infinite other varieties of wildlife and sensational landscapes that islands provide, this makes for a fascinating read.

The core reason for most of the travelling has been seabird research of one kind or another and we have evocative appetisers from scientific investigations. There are stories of conservation and problems, from rats and cats to hordes of uncaring tourists. But essentially, the stories of these islands, large and small, illustrate the continual elemental battle between land and sea, the power of the waves and resistance of the rocks, and the fortitude with which island life has been faced by both human and bird populations over millennia. Unlike any other 'bird book', it is a real one-off and has succeeded admirably.

Rob Hume

More info

- *No Island Too Far: Searching for Seabirds on Remote Specks of Land* by Michael Brooke (Pelagic, 2025).
- 344 pages, 16 page of colour plates.
- ISBN: 9781784275921. Hbk, £30.



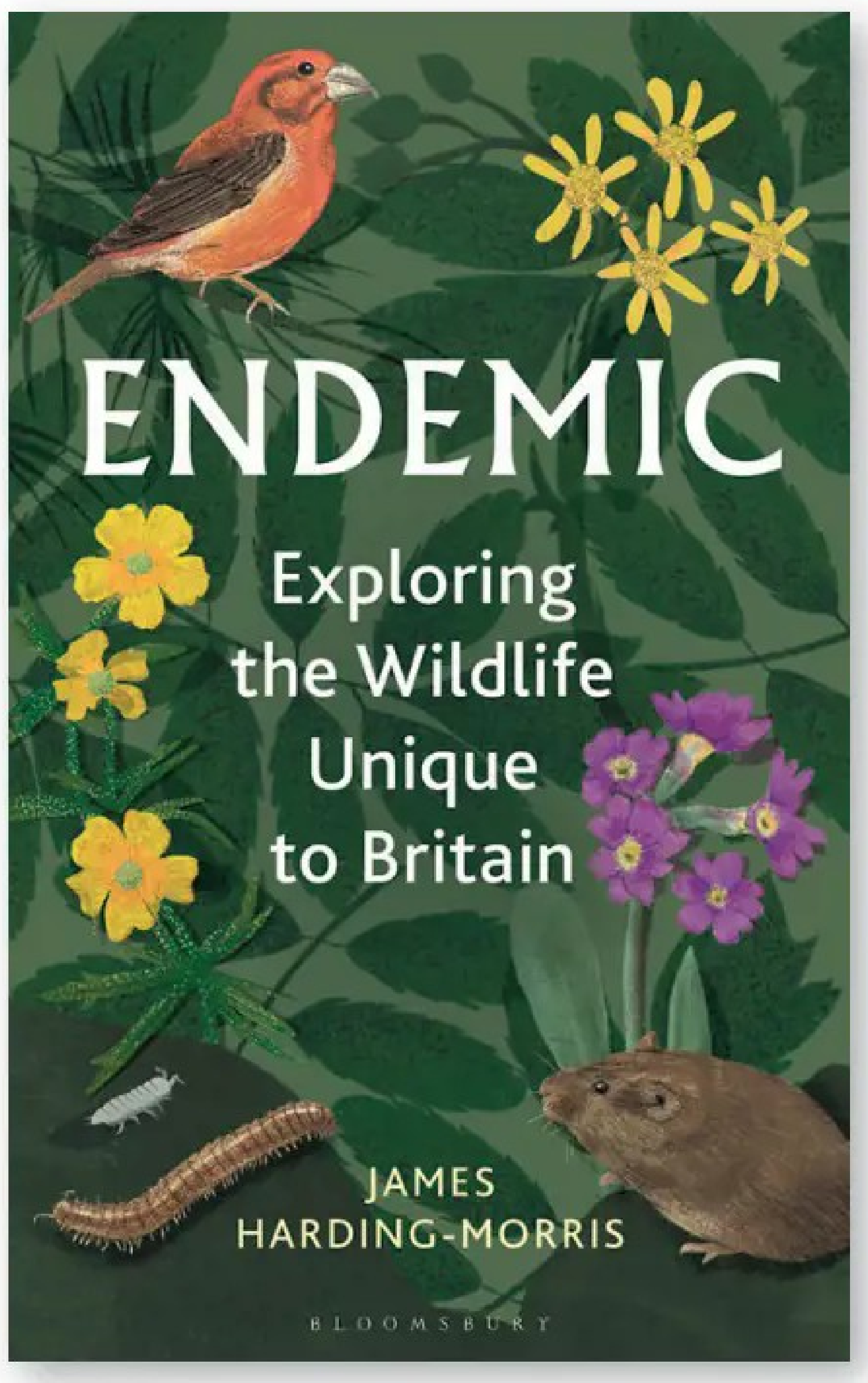
Unique wildlife

ENDEMISM is something I associate with exotic countries such as Madagascar, where 90% of the fauna and flora cannot be found anywhere else. However, here in Britain we have endemic species to be proud of, even though some are hard to find (and admittedly sometimes not particularly stunning to look at).

Britain has fewer endemic species than many countries due to its proximity to continental Europe, to which this island was once connected, enabling species to recolonise following glaciations. However, we have 50 endemic vascular plants and 20 unique insects. By comparison, we have no endemic mammal species and only one endemic bird.

This book is a celebration of the unique wildlife that Britain supports, in which James Harding-Morris sets off around the country in search of some of the interesting examples, proving that finding them can present a challenge. We follow his journeys looking for insects such as Northern February Red, a stonefly restricted to rivers in Scotland. Other insects that caught his imagination were Celtic Woodlouse, Charter's Bristletail and British False Flat-backed Millipede. With his background working for the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) it is no surprise that the author has a particular focus on endemic plants; he covers a lot of ground searching for these, including Purple Ramping-fumitory and False-toothed Lady's Mantle.

But when it comes to birds, our only endemic species is Scottish Crossbill – one that many of us ticked off on our early birding trips to Scotland, and one that some of us perhaps ought to scrub off our lists because the previously accepted field characters that we have traditionally relied upon have now been shown to be unsound. No longer can you just tick a Scottish Crossbill because it has a large bill and gives 'type C' calls! So, it comes as no surprise that despite searching the forests of Strathspey, the author failed to find one.


ENDEMIC
Exploring the Wildlife Unique to Britain
JAMES HARDING-MORRIS
BLOOMSBURY

Instead, he searches for Red Grouse in North Yorkshire. At the time when he started to write this book, Red Grouse was still considered to be a subspecies of Willow Ptarmigan, but in 2024 it was split, rendering it a British and Irish endemic (see *Birdwatch* 388: 48-50) – but, of course, it is not specifically endemic to either country, but both combined.

Harding-Morris also went in search of Willow Tit in South Yorkshire. Here the British *kleinschmidti* form was named in honour of Otto Kleinschmidt, one of two German ornithologists who examined Marsh Tit specimens in the British Museum in 1897 and realised that some were Willow Tits!

As with several endemic forms, British Willow Tits are declining, and the author discusses possible causes and examines the patchy distributions for each of his subjects, which are spread across 20 chapters. As with several recent books where authors go in search of rare plants, butterflies or dragonflies, it makes for an interesting read where you begin to feel as though you are part of the search party, seeking desirable quarry. ***Keith Betton***

More info

- *Endemic: Exploring the Wildlife Unique to Britain* by James Harding-Morris (Bloomsbury, 2025).
- 336 pages, black-and-white illustrations.
- ISBN: 9781399405676. Hbk, £20.

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This month's panel includes: Keith Betton, Kit Day, Chris Harbard, Matt Phelps and Amy Robjohns

IN THE GARDEN

Taking a pause

DECEMBER has always struck me as the month when the garden exhales. The pace slows, the noise fades, and what's left behind feels calm and honest – structure, stillness and a surprising amount of life quietly ticking away beneath the surface.

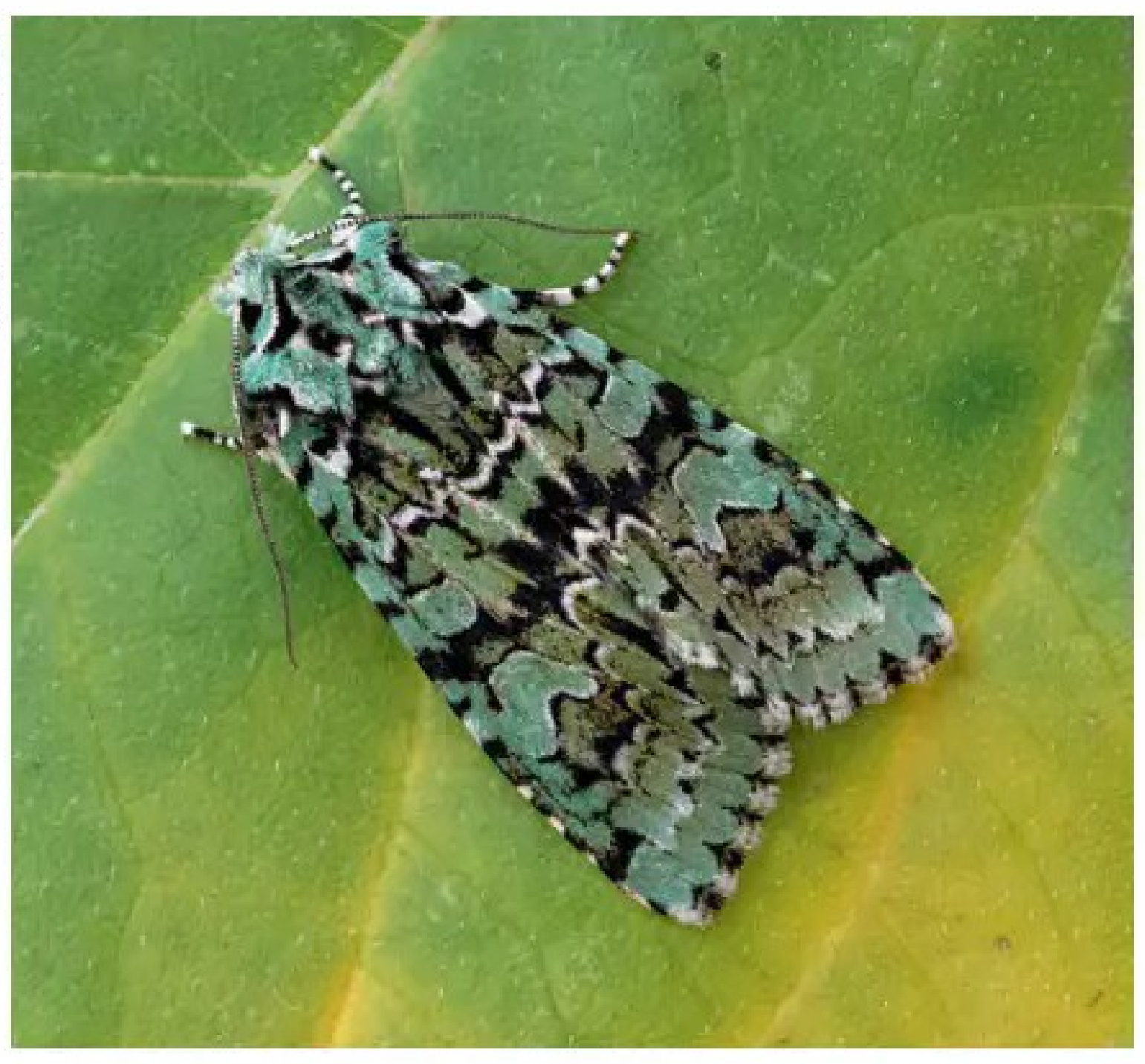
As birders, many of us use this time to reflect on the year past – birds we've seen, trips we've been on and the moments that stayed with us. It's much the same in the garden and I often find myself looking back over the past 12 months, wondering what's worked and what hasn't, which small decisions made the biggest difference for wildlife and, of course, the garden wildlife highlights of the year.

MATT PHELPS

Even if the weather can be poor at times, December is a restful month in the garden. Your local garden birds will be fully focused on survival and any natural food sources will be taking a hit as the temperatures drop.

MATT PHELPS

It's always tempting to cut everything back hard in the garden during winter, but try to leave some vegetation standing.


JOSH JONES

The splendid Merveille du Jour moth's name translates into English as 'Wonder of the Day' – it's easy to see why.

The main lesson I relearn every year – and hopefully one I have repeated enough here that it sticks with you too – is that it's almost always better to do less. The temptation to clear and cut everything back can be strong, but leaving well alone has real rewards. The hollow stems of last summer's flowers now shelter hibernating insects, and messy corners have become winter refuges for wrens, hedgehogs and all sorts of other hidden life. If you do end up pruning or tidying, keep the trimmings and stack them behind a shed or under a hedge. A simple pile of brash or dead wood will quietly become its own ecosystem before long.

When I worked as a gardener many years ago, I used to see fallen leaves as a chore. Now I treat them as a resource. They make an excellent mulch if you scatter them through the flowerbeds, or a perfect soil conditioner if left to rot down in a pile or bag. They also give cover to countless insects and amphibians – and that, in turn, brings more birds to forage through them on mild days.

If you've got a pond, it's best to leave it alone through the winter. Even under ice, life carries on. Don't break the surface – it can shock or harm the creatures below – but brushing off any snow will let in light and keep oxygen levels healthy. On really cold mornings you might notice the busiest spot in the garden isn't the feeder but the bird bath. A little open water, refreshed daily, is just as vital in cold spells as it is during heatwaves.

December is also a great time to think about what comes next. Cleaning out nestboxes or putting up new ones while the trees are bare is always a lovely thing to do – a small promise to the season ahead. If you've got room, plant a few bare-root trees or shrubs before the year's out. Native species such as Hawthorn, Rowan, Crab Apple or Blackthorn will bring spring blossom for pollinators and berries for birds later on. And for those odd mild days in January or February, early-flowering shrubs such as Winter Honeysuckle or Mahonia can make all the difference for early bees.

I've always loved the garden at this time of year. There's a feeling of rest, but not of ending – just a pause. Standing outside on a cold morning, you realise how much life is still there: a scolding wren, a robin giving its wistful wintry song, a Blackbird rustling through leaves. It's a good reminder that our gardens never really stop – they simply change tempo.

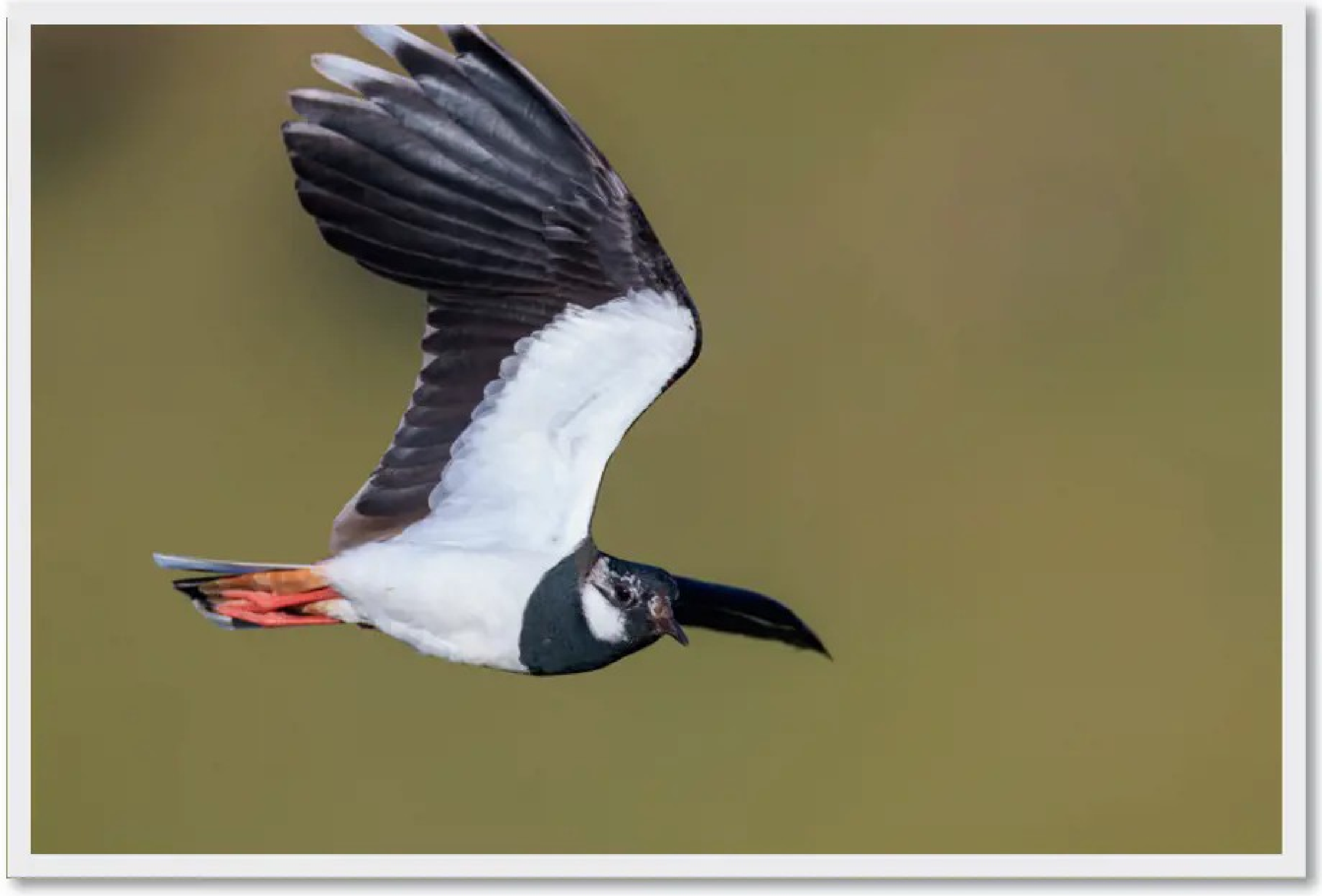
As I write this in late October, the garden year list has stalled somewhat, with the month to date producing just one new species in the form of the first Redpoll of the year rattling overhead on 5th. A week or so later, the moth trap produced the season's first Merveille du Jour; always a highlight of autumn mothing for me.

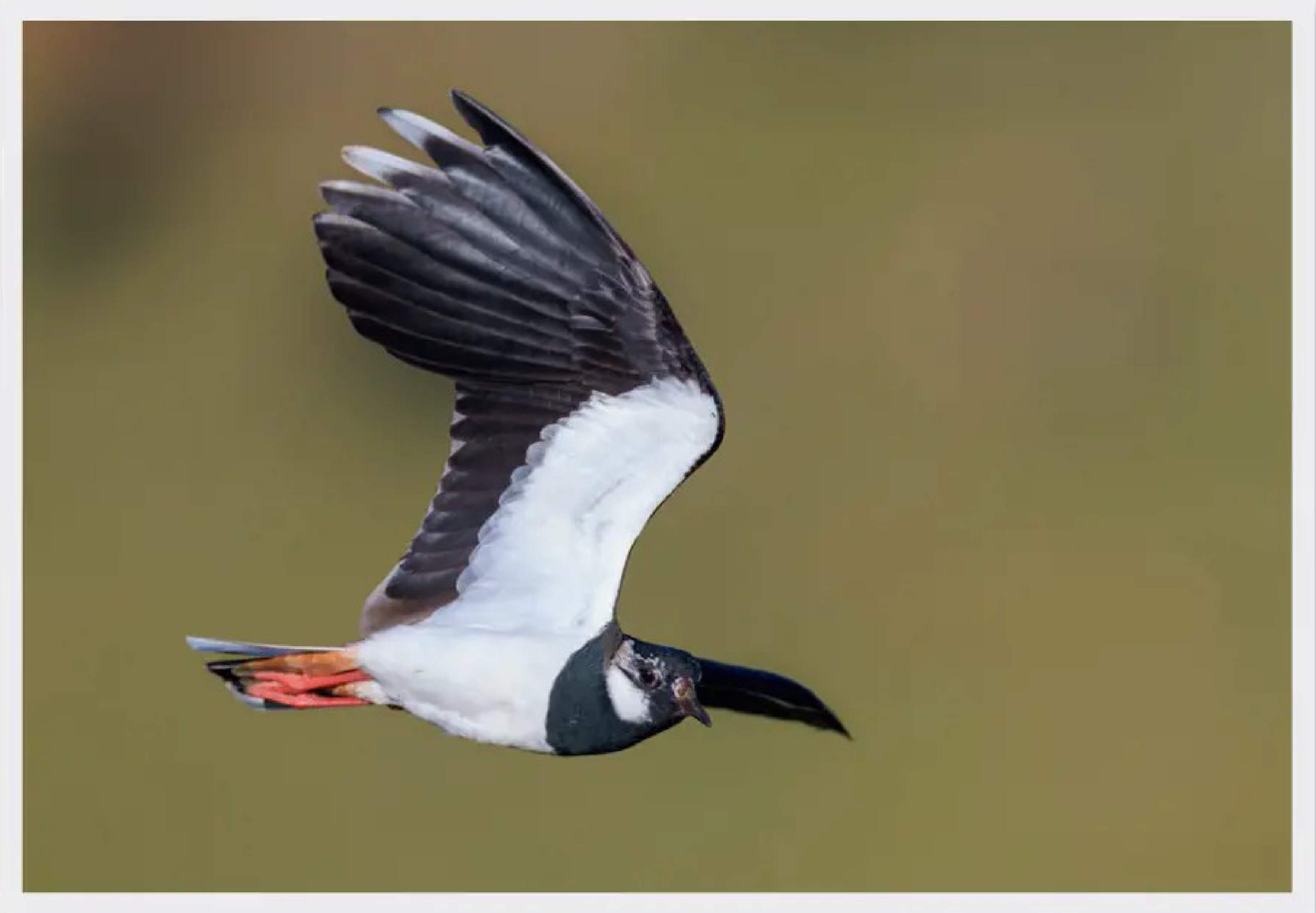
On a personal note, this will be the last of my gardening articles for the time being. After three years of penning monthly columns, it feels like the right moment to step back – though not, I hope, to stop noticing. Thank you for reading and for caring enough to make space for nature where you live. Here's to a winter of quiet garden wildlife-watching, and a new year full of promise. ***Matt Phelps***

ALL IMAGES BY KIT DAY

BEHIND THE LENS

Pros and cons of AI



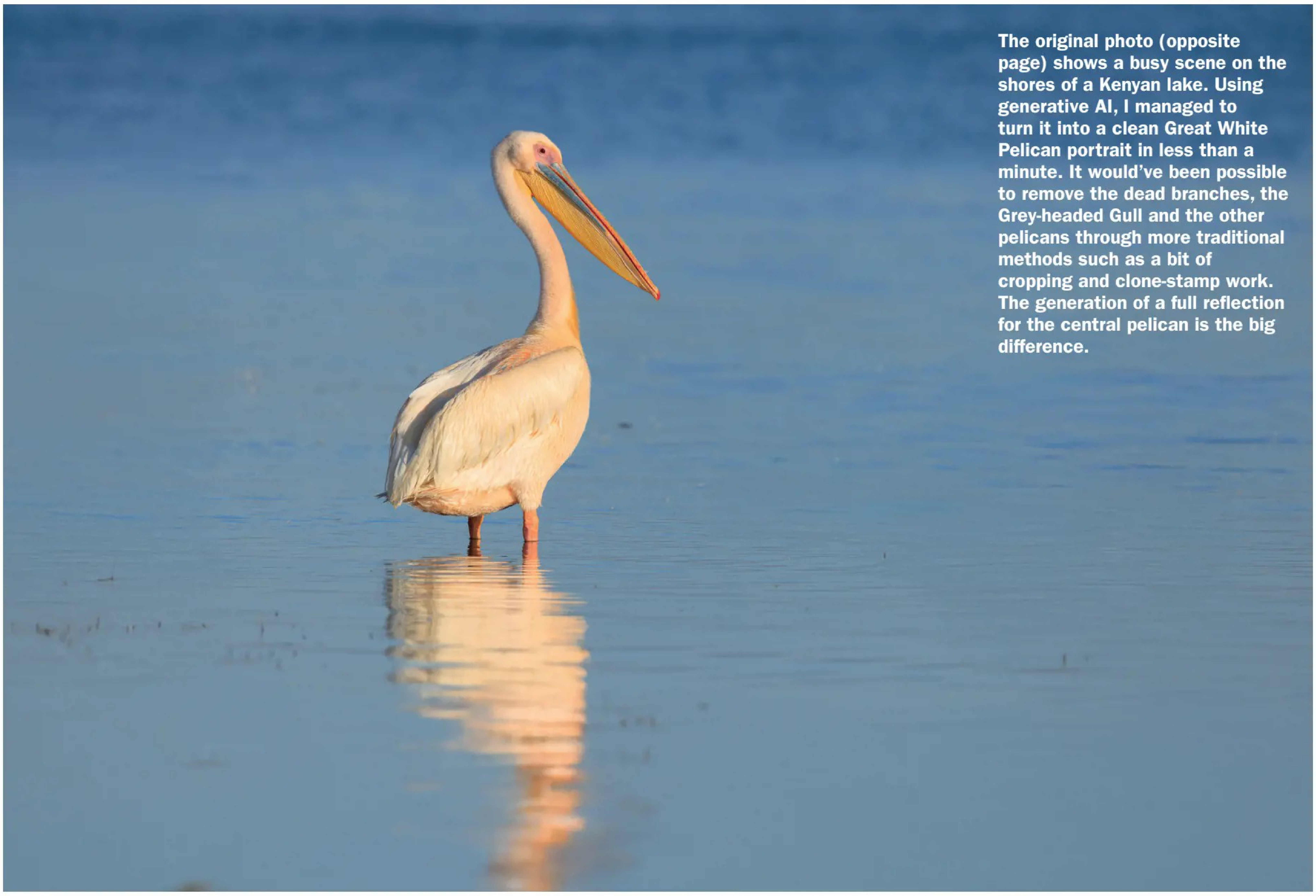


AI will have a go at generating or replacing parts of the bird, but often gets it wrong. For example, it has failed to give this Northern Lapwing enough white on the tip of its outermost primary feather (lower image).

IF you're anything like me, you're probably pretty tired of hearing about Artificial Intelligence (AI) these days. There are undoubtedly some excellent uses for AI – relevant to our field, many readers will have made use of the Merlin or ObsIdentify apps, for example. But lots of the talk around the subject seems to be about replacing jobs currently done by people. Then there's the eye-watering amount of energy and water that AI data centres require.

Like it or not, AI has very much landed in the bird-photography world as well. Google image-search results are already littered with (mostly awful) AI-generated images of birds. At present, these AI creations stand out among the real thing to us birders as much as a Brambling might among a flock of Chaffinches. But non-birders are far more easily fooled and generative AI is improving at a rate of knots. Before long, you may be able to produce a convincing photograph of a bird from the comfort of your living room – but where's the fun or challenge in that?

That said, we have been using AI at the post-processing stage of bird photography for years now, and there are ways that such features can help to improve our output. Magicking a bird from nothing is the extreme, but you can use **generative AI** more sparingly to enhance your images. The Generative Fill tool in Adobe Photoshop allows you to lasso parts of the image and replace them at the click of a button. Unsightly branches and background blemishes? Gone, just like that, and usually it's impossible to tell unless you zoom right in and 'pixel peep'. This can work with removing distractions that are in front of the bird, correcting misplaced feathers or even adding in missing wing-



The original photo (opposite page) shows a busy scene on the shores of a Kenyan lake. Using generative AI, I managed to turn it into a clean Great White Pelican portrait in less than a minute. It would've been possible to remove the dead branches, the Grey-headed Gull and the other pelicans through more traditional methods such as a bit of cropping and clone-stamp work. The generation of a full reflection for the central pelican is the big difference.

tips. The final option is more hit and miss; does AI know how many primaries your bird should have? It also strays into uneasy territory. Is it cheating to do this? Clearly, if the image is intended for ID purposes, creating bits of the bird that weren't originally visible is a big no.

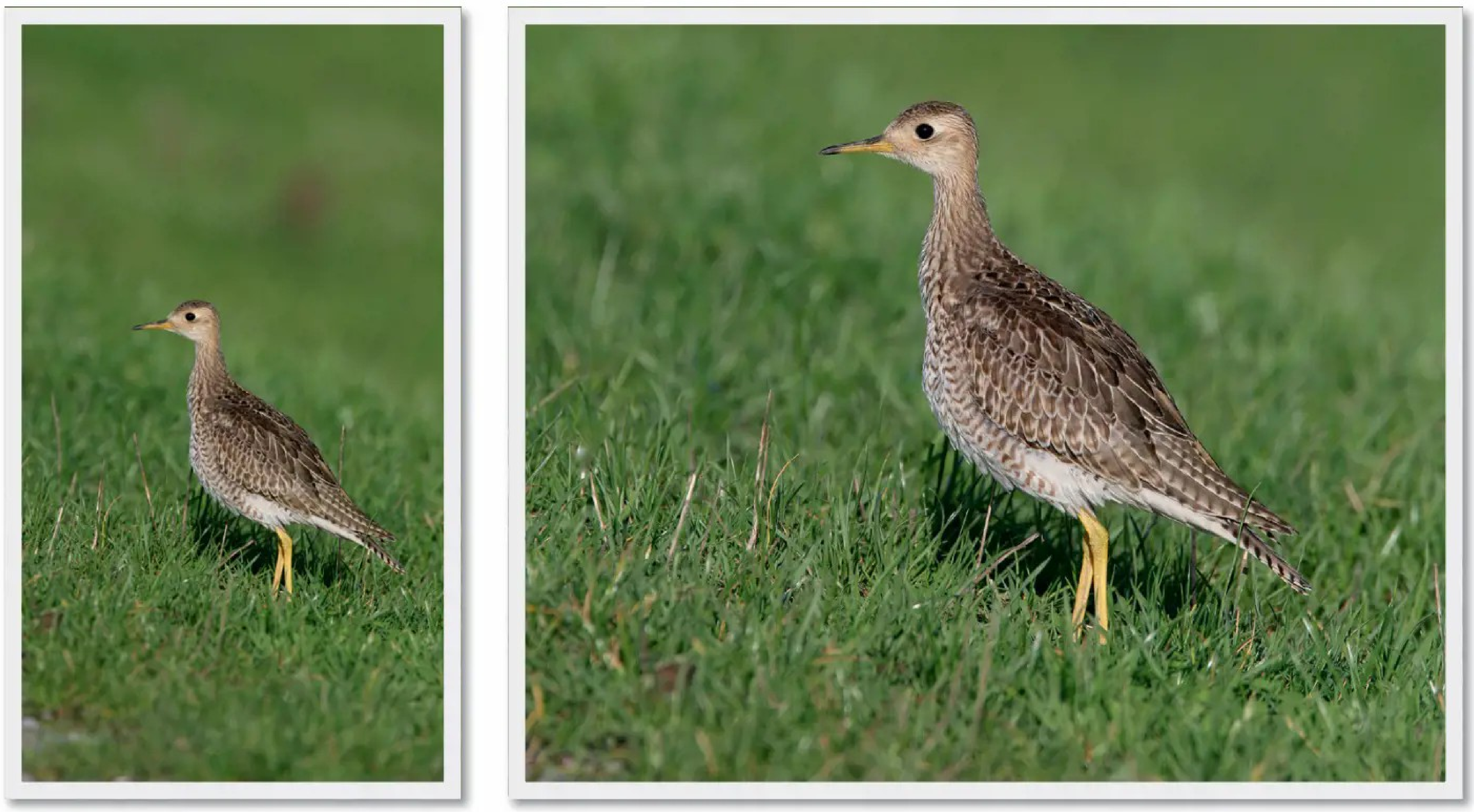
Perhaps slightly less controversial is the use of AI to generate new background ('Generative Expand' in Adobe language) for those occasions when the bird came too close.

AI upscaling uses generative AI to improve the detail of a low-resolution image. From what I've seen, this works amazingly on human faces that AI has been well trained on. Furthermore, it isn't bad on bird photos that are reasonably sharp and have some feather detail that the AI can build on. However, it is far less successful with soft, blurry images where it needs to invent textures from scratch – it tends to struggle to recognise that the subject is a bird that needs feathers. The results of trying to upscale such poorer-quality bird photos often look like a rather messy painting, which should be avoided. It would be better to crop less tightly around the subject to avoid exposing the lack of detail, or go back the next day and try to get closer to the bird.

Thirdly, there's **AI sharpening and noise reduction**. These are now widespread among bird photographers. Apps from DxO, Topaz, Adobe and ON1 use AI to miraculously strip away noise from digital images while retaining feather detail. This works best with RAW files, and for the most part is simply enhancing the detail that's already there – so there's less controversy about drafting in help from this AI technique.

So, what do we think? Is generative AI just a supercharged clone stamp and therefore another useful tool to enhance bird photos? Or does it make it too easy to 'cheat', marking the beginning of the end of bird photography as we know it? I suspect there'll be a spectrum of views on what is acceptable and where the line should be drawn, from the complete purist to those who think anything goes, with most of us somewhere in between. Perhaps photographers should declare instances where there's been significant use of AI in their images?

From a personal perspective, I think it will be a shame if generative AI becomes too commonplace in bird photography. I enjoy a clean portrait as much as anyone, but if every image becomes too 'neat', with a clear, isolated bird and a background free of any habitat, distractions or context, won't it get a bit boring? After all, the joy of photographing birds is found in the pursuit of the shots you want, and in finally succeeding. ***Kit Day***



I photographed this Upland Sandpiper in portrait orientation (left), which didn't leave enough space in front of the bird for a landscape crop. Generative AI created some very convincing-looking grass to fix this issue (right).

KIT DAY

Often overlooked in favour of the brighter-plumaged drakes, female Eurasian Wigeon is a beautiful bird. Why not try for some nice shots of one this month?

PHOTO TARGET

Eurasian Wigeon

WINTERING wildfowl are a very welcome photographic target on those calm and sunny winter days, and the whistling Eurasian Wigeon is my target for this month.

Wildfowl are generally very shy, so a good strategy is to seek out a site where this species is more used to people and therefore tolerant of a closer approach. Many of my best shots have been taken at popular spots on the North Norfolk coast.

Wigeon will offer plenty of opportunities for different types of images. Of course, you've got straightforward portraits of birds on land or on the water, but there are flocks and flight shots to aim for, too. You've also got two completely different plumages to photograph. The male is more colourful but the female is a subtly attractive bird. As always, if you can get a lower angle, it's always worth doing so to improve the background and give a better feel for life from the bird's viewpoint.

This month I'll be trying to capture a Eurasian Wigeon with its head held high, delivering the wonderful whistle that is such a feature of British wetlands in winter – hopefully you can too. ***Kit Day***

KIT DAY

Eurasian Wigeon offer the best opportunities for top-quality images at sites where the birds are habituated to human presence. It's well worth trying to find a site that fits the bill in your local area.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Handy skills

JOSH JONES

Just as humans are left- or right-handed, Northern Gannets have a favoured side that is illustrated when they plunge-dive.

HUMANS can be divided into those that are left- or right-handed. Approximately 10% of people are left-handed and some can use both hands equally well. Human brains consist of two hemispheres, with the left half of the brain controlling the right half of the body and vice versa. Dominance in the left side of the brain results in right-handedness. Birds also have two cerebral hemispheres and they too display 'handedness' or 'footedness', also known as lateralisation, in a variety of ways.

Birds can use each eye for a different task. From an early age, chickens use their right eye for foraging for food while the left is used for scanning for predators. This has been shown to manifest because the embryo tends to curl up in the egg so that its left eye is hidden and its right eye is close to the shell, receiving the most light, thus it is the right eye that is used for tasks which require fine-detailed vision, such as searching for food.

A study of 322 parrots of 16 species showed that all of them had a preferred side and were mainly left-footed, using the left eye to find food and the left foot to hold it. Every Sulphur-crested Cockatoo studied was left-footed, while many other species had some right-footed individuals. The only species with no preferred side was Cockatiel. Larger species appeared to show more lateralisation, especially those with larger brain sizes. Research has shown that birds with a strong side preference are better at tasks than their more 'ambidextrous' counterparts. The more birds use one eye to search for food, the better they become at, for example, recognising seeds from pebbles with that eye. One study showed that when choosing a mate, waterfowl, waders and galliformes mainly use their left eyes, while passerines all use their right eyes.

A study of Northern Gannets showed that they are left- or right-winged when feeding. Just before a gannet starts its spectacular plunge dive, it turns its body to one side before diving down and entering the water. The study revealed that half of monitored birds turn to the left every time and the other half to the right.

Homing pigeons, it appears, can use their sense of smell to help navigate when travelling, and they preferentially use their right nostril, taking longer to return if that nostril is artificially blocked. Crossbills have beaks in which the lower mandibles cross to either the left or the right. This difference dictates how they inspect a cone to look for seeds, proceeding clockwise or anticlockwise. Common Crossbills are split roughly 50/50 between left- or right-billed individuals, while three-quarters of Two-barred Crossbills have a lower mandible which crosses to the right.

Even us birders are lateralised. Which eye do you use when looking through a scope?

Chris Harbard

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Prickly customer

STEPHAN MORRIS

Holly berries are popular with thrushes such as Redwing. As the berries last on the tree for a long time, they can be eaten throughout the colder months. Mistle Thrushes will spend long periods guarding Holly.

APART from the traditional Christmas tree there are three other plants which are closely associated with yuletide – Mistletoe, Holly and Ivy. Each of these bear berries and attract wildlife, with the last two celebrated in a Christmas carol.

Holly is an evergreen tree or shrub. Known for its dark green, glossy leaves which are often very spiky, it can adjust its spikiness genetically by making the lower leaves, which are vulnerable to grazing, the spikiest while those higher up remain smooth-edged. Its bright red berries form a favourite food for birds throughout December and January and do not rot on the tree or fall to the ground, rather they remain edible for many months and lose little moisture, probably because Holly is an evergreen. Holly is the most common native evergreen in Britain and can grow into a tree reaching as high as 20 m or more. The oldest Holly tree recorded in Britain, thought to be more than 400 years old, is in Devon, while the tallest, at 25 m, grows in Hampshire.

Holly has distinct male and female plants. The latter bear white flowers and berries, while the male has yellowish flowers. The berries are enjoyed by thrushes. Mistle Thrushes seemingly prefer Holly to Mistletoe berries as they remain on the tree for a long time. A Mistle Thrush will guard a Holly tree throughout the winter, fighting off allcomers until the spring. It has been shown that pairs which guard a bush in this way produce bigger and earlier clutches the following spring than those which don't. Unsurprisingly, thrushes are key to distributing Holly seeds.

As well as providing food, Holly provides wonderful protection for a variety of nesting passerines, such as thrushes and finches, which can breed safely while protected by its spiky exterior. Some 30 species of invertebrates use Holly as a foodplant. These include Holly Leaf Miner (a fly), Black Vine Weevil, Privet Hawk-moth and Holly Blue butterfly. Interestingly, the spring generation of Holly Blue caterpillars feed on the flower buds, berries and terminal leaves of the plant, while the summer generation feeds on Ivy.

Chris Harbard

JOSH JONES

Caspian Gull is being seen with increasing frequency on Amy's patch. It's likely to be a similar story for many birders across Britain.

ON THE PATCH

Remembering ... December

THIS column brings to a close a year of happy local birding memories, which I hope have jogged readers' minds regarding similarly good times on their own patches. I'd like to say a special thank you to Dave Wallace, who has helped remind me of many highlights we've enjoyed!

December can be a cold, dank month with quiet birding days. However, it has delivered some great birds for me over the years, not least the three Eurasian Penduline Tits on 12 December 2015. I happened to be finishing a bird survey nearby and was soon on site enjoying good views. For a while, the birds hung around the area in front of the West Hide which we often joke never has anything to see – ignore even the very quietest spots of a patch at your peril.

Geese can be a draw this month and a wider influx of Russian White-fronted Geese in December 2020 saw nine birds drop down at Great Posbrook Farm, remaining there for 11 days. The area was particularly productive that winter, with multiple Water Pipits and good numbers of farmland species.

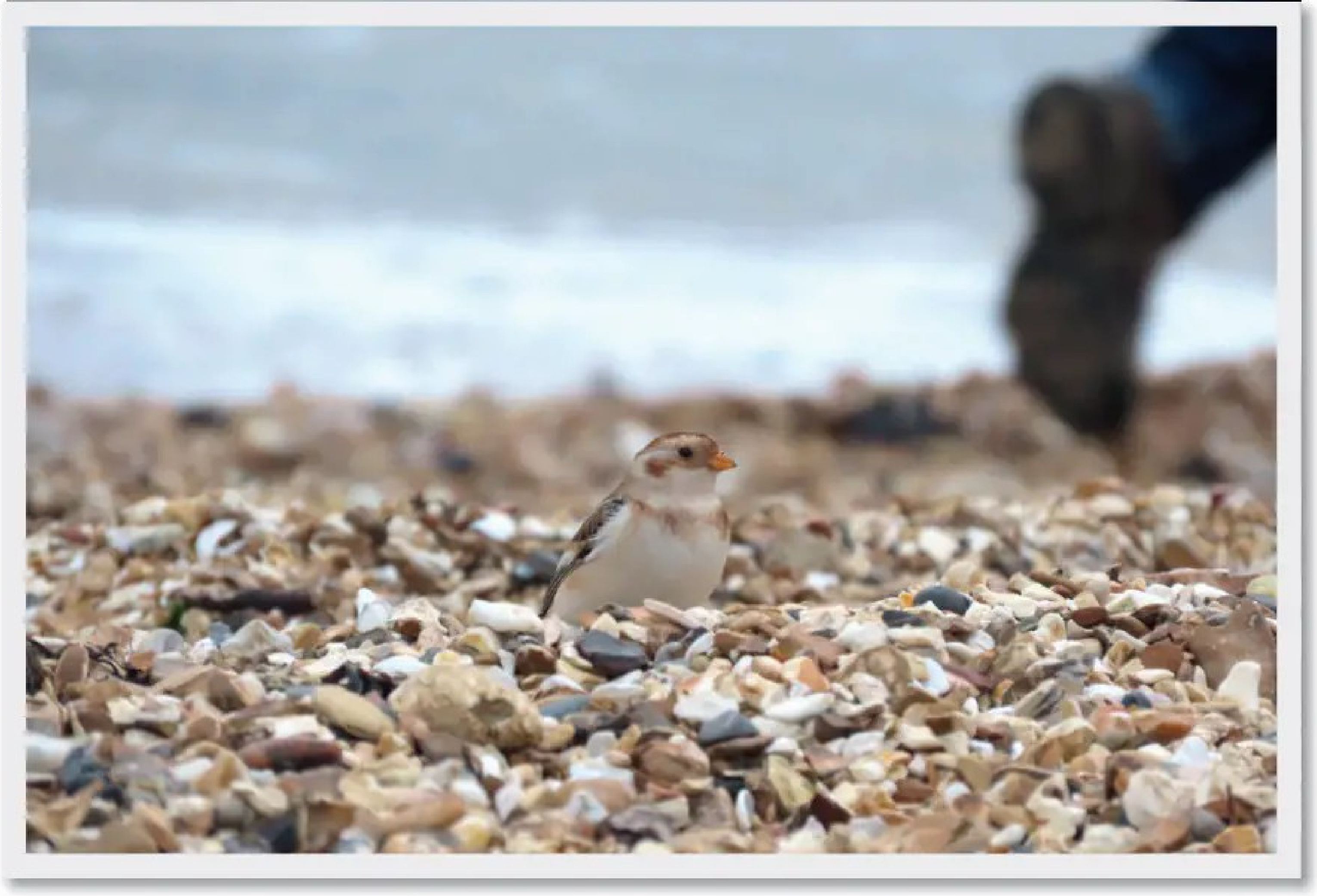
The wintering flock of Common Eider is sometimes close enough to shore to hear the birds making their lovely sounds. December can be productive for other seaduck, even if numbers have reduced in recent years, with Greater Scaup noted in 2017 and up to six Velvet Scoter occasionally appearing among the regular flock of Common Scoter.

Curiously, Great Skua has been a December highlight in the past, with records from Christmas Day 2015 and another in 2021. The latter was flying high west offshore and I was lucky to see it – fortunately, I received a punctual message and after a mad dash to the highest point of my patch I could pick it up with the camera.

December 2022 produced a particularly unusual record – a Common Whitethroat. This bird was thought to be a good candidate for one of the eastern forms. More expected this month are sightings of Siberian Chiffchaff, with birds seen in most years. Every winter I hope for a Snow Bunting. I love these charming passerines and the birding gods have blessed me with five very confiding individuals over the years. This December, I'd love a Lapland Bunting to mix it up!

On the subject of predictions, another species I'd love to see on my patch is Whooper Swan. Although the national wintering population is on the up, Whoopers remain rare on the south coast and especially so in Hampshire. One species we are seeing more of now is Caspian Gull, with birds becoming increasingly expected during the winter months.

Finally, while not a bird, it's worth a quick shout-out to one of my all-time local highlights – the Walrus that I saw hauled up on a slipway at Calshot in December 2022! This impressive beast from the far north was not actually on my patch but was scopable at great distance from Hill Head – a patch tick, sort of! ***Amy Robjohns***



AMY ROBJOHNS

Snow Buntings are always a welcome treat when they appear on the Hampshire coast. Amy has had several patch records over the years.

SIMON KING

One of Amy's most memorable December patch sightings was a mammal rather than a bird – this lump of a Walrus in December 2022.

Jamaica

Area: (% of UK):	10,991 sq km (5%)
Country checklist:	306 species
Country endemics:	29 species
Best time to visit:	November-March
Target for a trip:	90-100 species (one week)

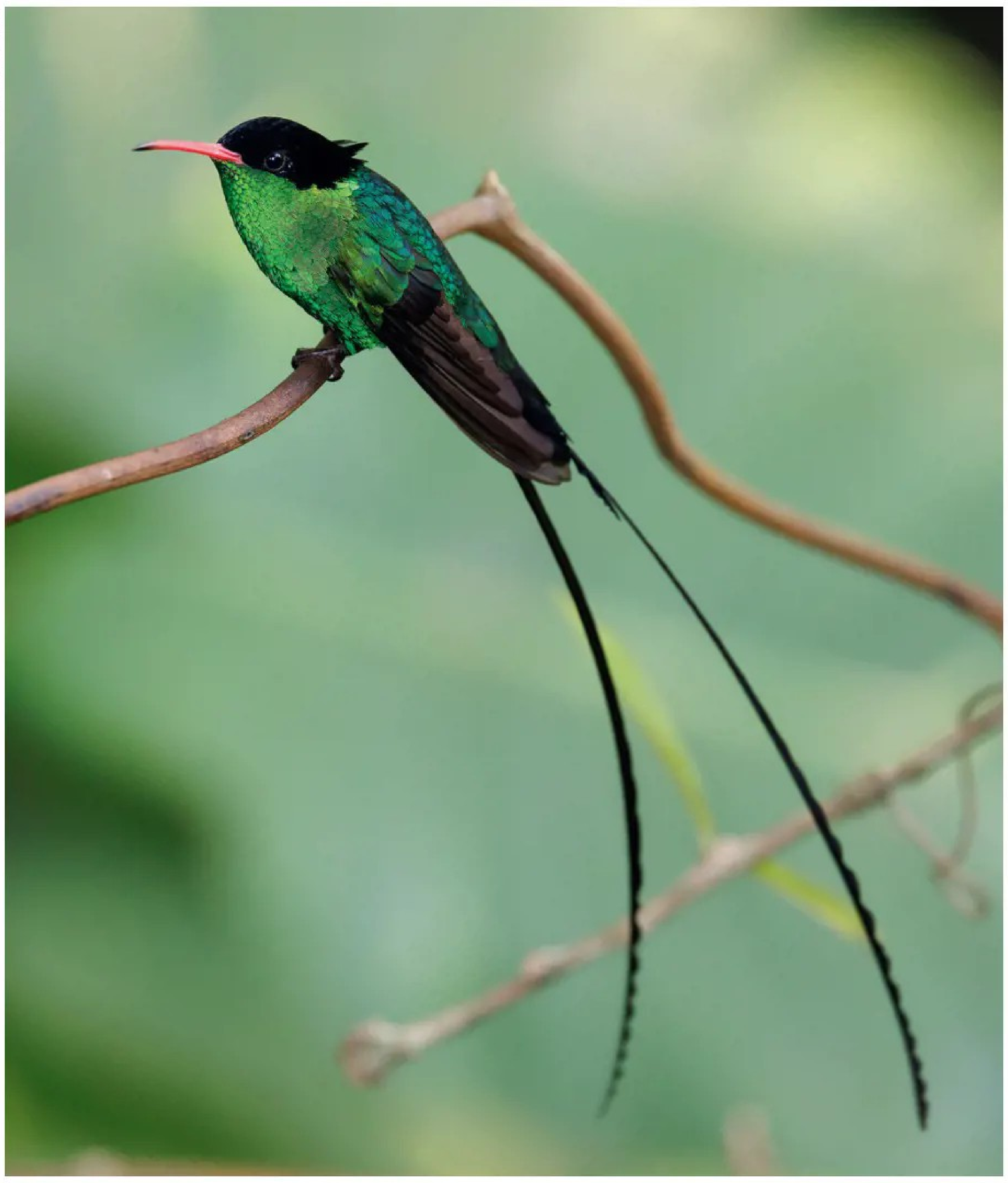
JOSH JONES

Sunrise in Jamaica's Blue Mountains. The humid forest here is full of endemics and offers the best opportunity to see the scarce Jamaican Blackbird. Birding is relatively easy from the main road running through the mountains.

ONE of the challenges for a birder with a family is to find destinations that are good for birding while offering plenty for the family to do. Jamaica is a place that caters for everyone; with some planning you can see most of the endemics and have time for the beach too!

The impressive country checklist of 306 species belies the fact that there are only 108 residents, although 29 are endemic. There are also around 50 North American species that spend the winter here, which is when most birders choose to visit due to the favourable weather conditions. Although the key birds are present all year, the rainfall and heat can make the birding quite testing at other seasons, particularly as some Jamaican roads are in poor condition.

If you are travelling for pure birding then the best plan is to fly to Kingston and focus on the east of island, taking in the Blue Mountains and the north-east coast, particularly around Port Antonio. The road into the mountains from Kingston starts out OK but before long you are dodging potholes, so having a car with good clearance is important. The key species in these mountains are Jamaican Blackbird, Blue Mountain Vireo and 'Blue Mountain Elaenia'. This last taxa is already split by some taxonomic authorities but if you rely on eBird you'll see it still listed as Greater Antillean Elaenia, which is also found on Hispaniola; however, the birds in Jamaica have a pinkish lower mandible, and yellowish-grey breast and belly. Crested Quail-Dove is also easier to see in these mountains than elsewhere. Finding Jamaican Owl requires a nocturnal excursion, but it is common and you should not struggle too much.


JOSH JONES

The spectacular Red-billed Streamertail, known locally as the 'doctor bird', surely ranks as one of the world's best-looking hummingbirds.

Having reached the coast, head east to Port Antonio. Here there are coastal hotels and guesthouses, and this allows for daily excursions to the little-used Ecclesdown Road. Here you are in hill forest where almost all the endemics have been recorded. Good lookouts allow you to see passing Black-billed and Yellow-billed Amazons along with Jamaican Crow. The forest is also a good place to see both Chestnut-bellied and Jamaican Lizard Cuckoos. If you don't find Black-billed Streamertail here, stop off at the San San Police Station as the species is often found in the nearby scrubby forest.

Some people choose to fly into the resort of Montego Bay for a family holiday. You should be able to find several endemics at Rocklands Bird Sanctuary, which is just a taxi ride away from most hotels (opens at 10 am; entrance is $30 per day). But you will miss Black-bellied Streamertail, which is found only in the far east of the island, and Jamaican Blackbird is very difficult away from the Blue Mountains. However, Cockpit Country will also produce most of the endemic species.

Getting there: British Airways flies from London to Kingston three days a week and indirect flights are available on other days. Virgin Atlantic flies direct from London to Montego Bay daily between January and March, and four days a week at other times. Fares start from around £700. TUI also flies into Montego Bay in the winter from Gatwick, Manchester and Birmingham.

Key species: Red-billed Streamertail Male 22-30 cm (including tail), female 10-11 cm. Least Concern. Until quite recently Red-billed and Black-billed Streamertails were considered different forms of the same species, but they were split in 1999 and live in different parts of the island, with a relatively small, shared zone where hybrids have been recorded. Known locally as the 'doctor bird', it is a status symbol to attract these amazing hummingbirds to your garden. The name comes from the birds' ability to puncture the base or sides of flowers to extract the nectar, and this was thought to be like a doctor carrying out surgery. At several locations such as Rocklands Bird Sanctuary, you can feed these birds and have them perch on your finger – unnatural, perhaps, but a brilliant experience.

Recommended books: *Birds of Jamaica* by Ann Haynes-Sutton and others (available secondhand but a new edition is due in 2026). Helm. £19. *A Birdwatchers' Guide to Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and the Caymans* by Guy Kirwan and others. Prion. £22. ***Keith Betton***

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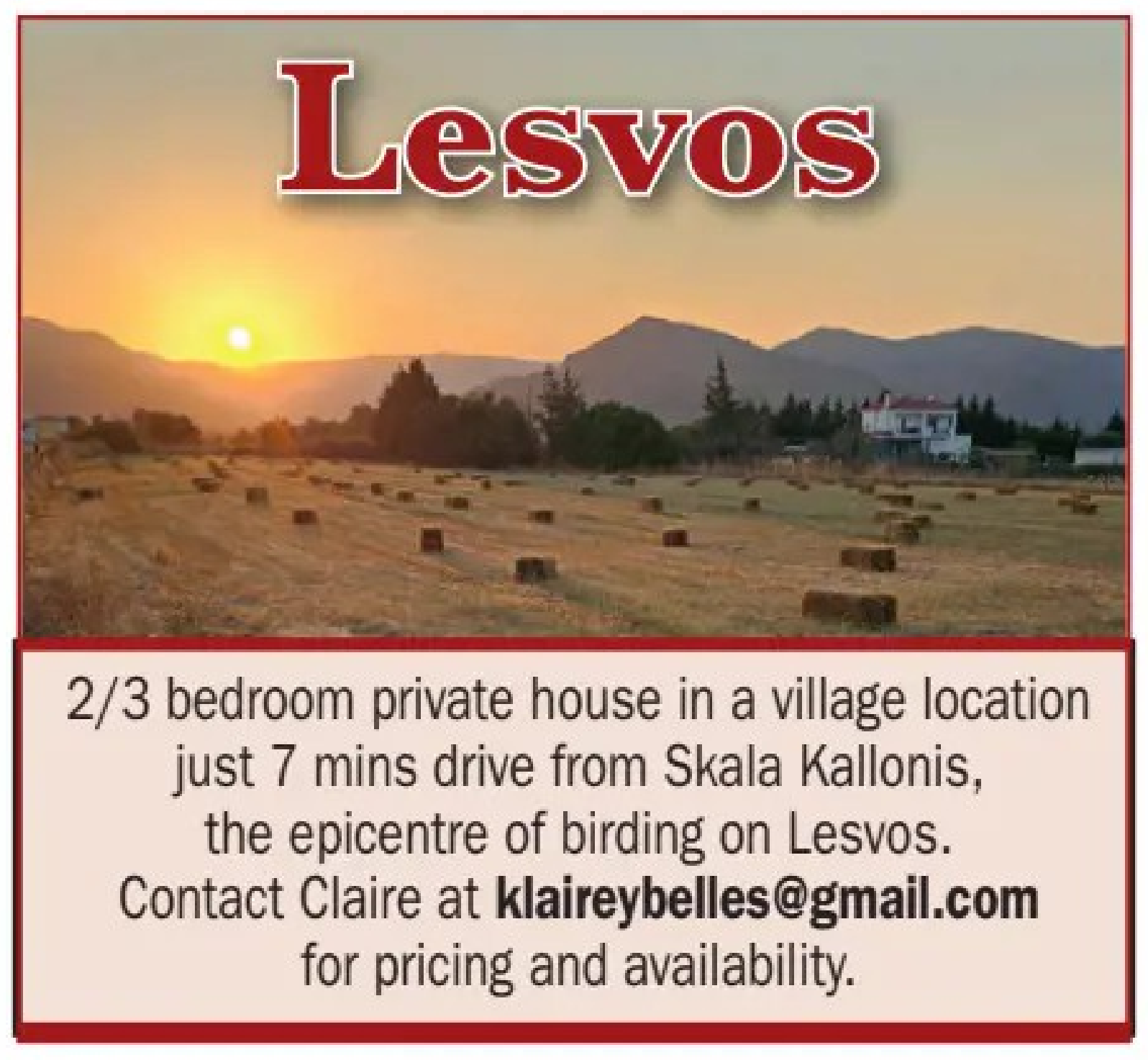

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In the next issue

January

SNOW GOOSE BY SAM VILES

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- **Wild wanderers and feral flocks** Snow Goose is most often seen as an escape from captivity in the UK, but genuine wild vagrants from North America arrive annually and small, established feral populations also exist. Sam Viles takes a look at the complex status of this goose.
- **The tidal watchtower** The Dee Estuary is an important habitat for many birds, including waders and wildfowl on a continental level. At the heart of it is Hilbre Island Bird Observatory, and Chris Williams introduces the 'obs' and discusses its history and key species.
- **Working out wigeon** American Wigeon is a scarce but regular visitor to the UK, arriving from North America and typically found during the winter months. Identification can be challenging, particularly with females, but Brian Stretch is on hand to talk you through the key points.
- **Elizabeth's untold genius** Elizabeth Gould created more than 650 lithographs for major ornithological books published by her husband, the famed naturalist John Gould. However, her talent and output were often downplayed or uncredited during her lifetime, as Sue Lisk explains.
- **Tomorrow's skies** Climate change is dramatically shifting the status of many bird species, particularly those that visit our shores in the winter months. David Callahan pops in his time-travel machine to provide a hypothetical future day of winter birding in Britain.
- **A nation of counters** Waterbird monitoring has a long tradition in the UK. The BTO's Teresa Frost and Chris Thaxter explain how these surveys connects us to the Arctic environment and a global community.

PLUS: **the BirdGuides team provides round-ups of November's highlights, topical comment from our columnists, the latest news and views, advice to enhance your knowledge, and our editorial team responds to your questions.**

January issue on sale 24 December 2025

LUCY MCROBERT

More love for *Listers*

Our columnist finds herself unexpectedly moved – and amused – by a viral film that captures the joy, absurdity and authenticity of modern birding.

Following a tip-off from my boss, Mark, we settled down to watch a documentary fresh from the USA in August 2025: *Listers: A Glimpse Into Extreme Birdwatching*. I was quietly sceptical. Most of the twitchy-cum-listy documentaries we've seen previously have skirted on the ridiculous, with the producers (understandably) focusing along the extremes, the laughable or the pitiable. I get it. Think *Twitchers: A Very British Obsession*, which was of its time and entertaining, but determined to paint some of the main characters in an unnecessarily negative light.

More recently there have been some fictional films and series, such as *The Residence* (Netflix 2025), which focused on a detective intent on solving a murder in The White House. The subplot – she was a birder, except that pretty much all her birding happened throughout the night. Entertaining, yes. Slightly ridiculous? Ahem. Throw in a healthy dose of poorly crafted CGI birds (think *The Big Year* with Steve Martin from 2011) and it's all a bit cringey. I'll never understand how technology can master dinosaurs, dragons and the octopus face in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, yet when asked to recreate living things the programmers go to pieces. So, I was a little apprehensive as this latest film started, despite Mark's glowing review.

Well, wasn't I wrong? This was one hour and 59 minutes of gold. The story, self-shot by two brothers Quentin and Owen Reiser, was filmed in 2024 in only a year and is on YouTube. It follows their attempt to set the Lower 48 (the US, not including Hawaii or Alaska) Big Year record.

Birding beginners

Neither Quentin nor Owen knew anything about birds as recently as 2023. One day, they smoked something illicit and remarked that it would be cool to see all the birds in a field guide that they had. And they just did it, without money, knowledge or possibly even a pair of binoculars to start with. They didn't spend months planning, saving, budgeting or revising, they simply Googled 'what states have the most birds' and then headed south in a Kia Sedona that inevitably broke down at various points. They dressed like 1970s music icons and made various references to mushrooms. Genius.

The whole thing was so real. The brothers could have gone in with the same negative and mickey-taking attitude that we see in so many filmmakers, but the only people they're putting down are themselves. Sure, the film does highlight, at times, the more extreme individuals, but they work hard, have fun, are kind and view the world (for a year) in a wonderfully bird-centric way. They spent two days tapping rocks together to lure a Yellow Rail out of a mosquito-infested swamp. Interviews were thoughtful with a genuinely diverse bunch, and the footage they captured of some species was outstanding.

Like many birders, Lucy was a huge fan of the YouTube film *Listers: A Glimpse Into Extreme Birdwatching*.

> “Interviews are thoughtful with a genuinely diverse bunch, and the footage they capture of some species is outstanding”

They see 579 species, putting them in 23rd position in the Lower 48 according to eBird (apparently all that matters now in the US) in the same year that Ezekial Dobson broke the record with 758 species. They delve into multiple modern controversial angles of birding – renaming birds, tape-luring, conservation issues, twitching vs birding and so on. It's beautifully relatable and serendipitous. They do wonderful side pieces with joyful animations. They say things like 'for real' and 'dude', and swear and point out how hard birding is because things genuinely look and sound the same if you're not experienced. They throw up and faint on pelagics. They've written an accompanying field guide (I've bought two copies). The film has been viewed 1.8 million times since August, making it an instant cult classic. Put the magazine down now and watch it. I insist. ■

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